

and the Half-Blood Prince



HARRY POTTER AND THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE



BY
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*To MACKENZIE,
MY BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER,
I DEDICATE
HER INK-AND-PAPER TWIN.*

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CHAPTER ONE



THE OTHER MINISTER

It was nearing midnight and the Prime Minister was sitting alone in his office, reading a long memo that was slipping through his brain without leaving the slightest trace of meaning behind. He was waiting for a call from the President of a far distant country, and between wondering when the wretched man would telephone, and trying to suppress unpleasant memories of what had been a very long, tiring, and difficult week, there was not much space in his head for anything else. The more he attempted to focus on the print on the page before him, the more clearly the Prime Minister could see the

gloating face of one of his political opponents. This particular opponent had appeared on the news that very day, not only to enumerate all the terrible things that had happened in the last week (as though anyone needed reminding) but also to explain why each and every one of them was the government's fault.

The Prime Minister's pulse quickened at the very thought of these accusations, for they were neither fair nor true. How on earth was his government supposed to have stopped that bridge collapsing? It was outrageous for anybody to suggest that they were not spending enough on bridges. The bridge was fewer than ten years old, and the best experts were at a loss to explain why it had snapped cleanly in two, sending a dozen cars into the watery depths of the river below. And how dare anyone suggest that it was lack of policemen that had resulted in those two very nasty and well-publicized murders? Or that the government should have somehow foreseen the freak hurricane in the West Country that had caused so much damage to both people and property? And was it *his* fault that one of his Junior Ministers, Herbert Chorley, had chosen this week to act so peculiarly that he was now going to be spending a lot more time with his family?

"A grim mood has gripped the country," the opponent had concluded, barely concealing his own broad grin.

And unfortunately, this was perfectly true. The Prime Minister felt it himself; people really did seem more miserable than usual. Even the weather was dismal; all this chilly mist in the middle of July. . . . It wasn't right, it wasn't normal. . . .

He turned over the second page of the memo, saw how much

longer it went on, and gave it up as a bad job. Stretching his arms above his head he looked around his office mournfully. It was a handsome room, with a fine marble fireplace facing the long sash windows, firmly closed against the unseasonable chill. With a slight shiver, the Prime Minister got up and moved over to the window, looking out at the thin mist that was pressing itself against the glass. It was then, as he stood with his back to the room, that he heard a soft cough behind him.

He froze, nose to nose with his own scared-looking reflection in the dark glass. He knew that cough. He had heard it before. He turned very slowly to face the empty room.

“Hello?” he said, trying to sound braver than he felt.

For a brief moment he allowed himself the impossible hope that nobody would answer him. However, a voice responded at once, a crisp, decisive voice that sounded as though it were reading a prepared statement. It was coming — as the Prime Minister had known at the first cough — from the froglike little man wearing a long silver wig who was depicted in a small, dirty oil painting in the far corner of the room.

“To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Urgent we meet. Kindly respond immediately. Sincerely, Fudge.”

The man in the painting looked inquiringly at the Prime Minister.

“Er,” said the Prime Minister, “listen. . . . It’s not a very good time for me. . . . I’m waiting for a telephone call, you see . . . from the President of —”

“That can be rearranged,” said the portrait at once. The Prime Minister’s heart sank. He had been afraid of that.

“But I really was rather hoping to speak —”

“We shall arrange for the President to forget to call. He will telephone tomorrow night instead,” said the little man. “Kindly respond immediately to Mr. Fudge.”

“I . . . oh . . . very well,” said the Prime Minister weakly. “Yes, I’ll see Fudge.”

He hurried back to his desk, straightening his tie as he went. He had barely resumed his seat, and arranged his face into what he hoped was a relaxed and unfazed expression, when bright green flames burst into life in the empty grate beneath his marble mantelpiece. He watched, trying not to betray a flicker of surprise or alarm, as a portly man appeared within the flames, spinning as fast as a top. Seconds later, he had climbed out onto a rather fine antique rug, brushing ash from the sleeves of his long pin-striped cloak, a lime-green bowler hat in his hand.

“Ah . . . Prime Minister,” said Cornelius Fudge, striding forward with his hand outstretched. “Good to see you again.”

The Prime Minister could not honestly return this compliment, so said nothing at all. He was not remotely pleased to see Fudge, whose occasional appearances, apart from being downright alarming in themselves, generally meant that he was about to hear some very bad news. Furthermore, Fudge was looking distinctly careworn. He was thinner, balder, and grayer, and his face had a crumpled look. The Prime Minister had seen that kind of look in politicians before, and it never boded well.

“How can I help you?” he said, shaking Fudge’s hand very briefly and gesturing toward the hardest of the chairs in front of the desk.

“Difficult to know where to begin,” muttered Fudge, pulling up the chair, sitting down, and placing his green bowler upon his knees. “What a week, what a week . . .”

“Had a bad one too, have you?” asked the Prime Minister stiffly, hoping to convey by this that he had quite enough on his plate already without any extra helpings from Fudge.

“Yes, of course,” said Fudge, rubbing his eyes wearily and looking morosely at the Prime Minister. “I’ve been having the same week you have, Prime Minister. The Brockdale Bridge . . . the Bones and Vance murders . . . not to mention the ruckus in the West Country . . .”

“You — er — your — I mean to say, some of your people were — were involved in those — those things, were they?”

Fudge fixed the Prime Minister with a rather stern look. “Of course they were,” he said. “Surely you’ve realized what’s going on?”

“I . . .” hesitated the Prime Minister.

It was precisely this sort of behavior that made him dislike Fudge’s visits so much. He was, after all, the Prime Minister and did not appreciate being made to feel like an ignorant schoolboy. But of course, it had been like this from his very first meeting with Fudge on his very first evening as Prime Minister. He remembered it as though it were yesterday and knew it would haunt him until his dying day.

He had been standing alone in this very office, savoring the triumph that was his after so many years of dreaming and scheming, when he had heard a cough behind him, just like tonight, and turned to find that ugly little portrait talking to him, announcing that the Minister of Magic was about to arrive and introduce himself.

Naturally, he had thought that the long campaign and the strain of the election had caused him to go mad. He had been utterly terrified to find a portrait talking to him, though this had been nothing to how he felt when a self-proclaimed wizard had bounced out of the fireplace and shaken his hand. He had remained speechless throughout Fudge's kindly explanation that there were witches and wizards still living in secret all over the world and his reassurances that he was not to bother his head about them as the Ministry of Magic took responsibility for the whole Wizarding community and prevented the non-magical population from getting wind of them. It was, said Fudge, a difficult job that encompassed everything from regulations on responsible use of broomsticks to keeping the dragon population under control (the Prime Minister remembered clutching the desk for support at this point). Fudge had then patted the shoulder of the still-dumbstruck Prime Minister in a fatherly sort of way.

"Not to worry," he had said, "it's odds-on you'll never see me again. I'll only bother you if there's something really serious going on our end, something that's likely to affect the Muggles — the non-magical population, I should say. Otherwise, it's live and let live. And I must say, you're taking it a lot better than your predecessor. *He* tried to throw me out the window, thought I was a hoax planned by the opposition."

At this, the Prime Minister had found his voice at last. "You're — you're *not* a hoax, then?"

It had been his last, desperate hope.

"No," said Fudge gently. "No, I'm afraid I'm not. Look."

And he had turned the Prime Minister's teacup into a gerbil.

“But,” said the Prime Minister breathlessly, watching his teacup chewing on the corner of his next speech, “but why — why has nobody told me — ?”

“The Minister of Magic only reveals him- or herself to the Muggle Prime Minister of the day,” said Fudge, poking his wand back inside his jacket. “We find it the best way to maintain secrecy.”

“But then,” bleated the Prime Minister, “why hasn’t a former Prime Minister warned me — ?”

At this, Fudge had actually laughed.

“My dear Prime Minister, are *you* ever going to tell anybody?”

Still chortling, Fudge had thrown some powder into the fireplace, stepped into the emerald flames, and vanished with a whooshing sound. The Prime Minister had stood there, quite motionless, and realized that he would never, as long as he lived, dare mention this encounter to a living soul, for who in the wide world would believe him?

The shock had taken a little while to wear off. For a time, he had tried to convince himself that Fudge had indeed been a hallucination brought on by lack of sleep during his grueling election campaign. In a vain attempt to rid himself of all reminders of this uncomfortable encounter, he had given the gerbil to his delighted niece and instructed his private secretary to take down the portrait of the ugly little man who had announced Fudge’s arrival. To the Prime Minister’s dismay, however, the portrait had proved impossible to remove. When several carpenters, a builder or two, an art historian, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer had all tried unsuccessfully to prise it from the wall, the Prime Minister had abandoned the attempt

and simply resolved to hope that the thing remained motionless and silent for the rest of his term in office. Occasionally he could have sworn he saw out of the corner of his eye the occupant of the painting yawning, or else scratching his nose; even, once or twice, simply walking out of his frame and leaving nothing but a stretch of muddy-brown canvas behind. However, he had trained himself not to look at the picture very much, and always to tell himself firmly that his eyes were playing tricks on him when anything like this happened.

Then, three years ago, on a night very like tonight, the Prime Minister had been alone in his office when the portrait had once again announced the imminent arrival of Fudge, who had burst out of the fireplace, sopping wet and in a state of considerable panic. Before the Prime Minister could ask why he was dripping all over the Axminster, Fudge had started ranting about a prison the Prime Minister had never heard of, a man named “Serious” Black, something that sounded like “Hogwarts,” and a boy called Harry Potter, none of which made the remotest sense to the Prime Minister.

“. . . I’ve just come from Azkaban,” Fudge had panted, tipping a large amount of water out of the rim of his bowler hat into his pocket. “Middle of the North Sea, you know, nasty flight . . . the dementors are in uproar” — he shuddered — “they’ve never had a breakout before. Anyway, I had to come to you, Prime Minister. Black’s a known Muggle killer and may be planning to rejoin You-Know-Who. . . . But of course, you don’t even know who You-Know-Who is!” He had gazed hopelessly at the Prime Minister for a moment, then said, “Well, sit down, sit down, I’d better fill you in. . . . Have a whiskey . . .”

The Prime Minister rather resented being told to sit down in his own office, let alone offered his own whiskey, but he sat nevertheless. Fudge pulled out his wand, conjured two large glasses full of amber liquid out of thin air, pushed one of them into the Prime Minister's hand, and drew up a chair.

Fudge had talked for more than an hour. At one point, he had refused to say a certain name aloud and wrote it instead on a piece of parchment, which he had thrust into the Prime Minister's whiskey-free hand. When at last Fudge had stood up to leave, the Prime Minister had stood up too.

"So you think that . . ." He had squinted down at the name in his left hand. "Lord Vol —"

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" snarled Fudge.

"I'm sorry. . . . You think that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is still alive, then?"

"Well, Dumbledore says he is," said Fudge, as he had fastened his pin-striped cloak under his chin, "but we've never found him. If you ask me, he's not dangerous unless he's got support, so it's Black we ought to be worrying about. You'll put out that warning, then? Excellent. Well, I hope we don't see each other again, Prime Minister! Good night."

But they had seen each other again. Less than a year later a harassed-looking Fudge had appeared out of thin air in the cabinet room to inform the Prime Minister that there had been a spot of bother at the Kwidditch (or that was what it had sounded like) World Cup and that several Muggles had been "involved," but that the Prime Minister was not to worry, the fact that You-Know-Who's Mark had

been seen again meant nothing; Fudge was sure it was an isolated incident, and the Muggle Liaison Office was dealing with all memory modifications as they spoke.

“Oh, and I almost forgot,” Fudge had added. “We’re importing three foreign dragons and a sphinx for the Triwizard Tournament, quite routine, but the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures tells me that it’s down in the rule book that we have to notify you if we’re bringing highly dangerous creatures into the country.”

“I — what — *dragons*?” spluttered the Prime Minister.

“Yes, three,” said Fudge. “And a sphinx. Well, good day to you.”

The Prime Minister had hoped beyond hope that dragons and sphinxes would be the worst of it, but no. Less than two years later, Fudge had erupted out of the fire yet again, this time with the news that there had been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

“A *mass* breakout?” repeated the Prime Minister hoarsely.

“No need to worry, no need to worry!” shouted Fudge, already with one foot in the flames. “We’ll have them rounded up in no time — just thought you ought to know!”

And before the Prime Minister could shout, “Now, wait just one moment!” Fudge had vanished in a shower of green sparks.

Whatever the press and the opposition might say, the Prime Minister was not a foolish man. It had not escaped his notice that, despite Fudge’s assurances at their first meeting, they were now seeing rather a lot of each other, nor that Fudge was becoming more flustered with each visit. Little though he liked to think about the Minister of Magic (or, as he always called Fudge in his head, the

Other Minister), the Prime Minister could not help but fear that the next time Fudge appeared it would be with graver news still. The sight, therefore, of Fudge stepping out of the fire once more, looking disheveled and fretful and sternly surprised that the Prime Minister did not know exactly why he was there, was about the worst thing that had happened in the course of this extremely gloomy week.

“How should I know what’s going on in the — er — Wizarding community?” snapped the Prime Minister now. “I have a country to run and quite enough concerns at the moment without —”

“We have the same concerns,” Fudge interrupted. “The Brockdale Bridge didn’t wear out. That wasn’t really a hurricane. Those murders were not the work of Muggles. And Herbert Chorley’s family would be safer without him. We are currently making arrangements to have him transferred to St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. The move should be effected tonight.”

“What do you . . . I’m afraid I . . . *What?*” blustered the Prime Minister.

Fudge took a great, deep breath and said, “Prime Minister, I am very sorry to have to tell you that he’s back. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back.”

“Back? When you say ‘back’ . . . he’s alive? I mean —”

The Prime Minister groped in his memory for the details of that horrible conversation of three years previously, when Fudge had told him about the wizard who was feared above all others, the wizard who had committed a thousand terrible crimes before his mysterious disappearance fifteen years earlier.

“Yes, alive,” said Fudge. “That is — I don’t know — is a man alive if he can’t be killed? I don’t really understand it, and Dumbledore won’t explain properly — but anyway, he’s certainly got a body and is walking and talking and killing, so I suppose, for the purposes of our discussion, yes, he’s alive.”

The Prime Minister did not know what to say to this, but a persistent habit of wishing to appear well-informed on any subject that came up made him cast around for any details he could remember of their previous conversations.

“Is Serious Black with — er — He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?”

“Black? Black?” said Fudge distractedly, turning his bowler rapidly in his fingers. “Sirius Black, you mean? Merlin’s beard, no. Black’s dead. Turns out we were — er — mistaken about Black. He was innocent after all. And he wasn’t in league with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named either. I mean,” he added defensively, spinning the bowler hat still faster, “all the evidence pointed — we had more than fifty eyewitnesses — but anyway, as I say, he’s dead. Murdered, as a matter of fact. On Ministry of Magic premises. There’s going to be an inquiry, actually. . . .”

To his great surprise, the Prime Minister felt a fleeting stab of pity for Fudge at this point. It was, however, eclipsed almost immediately by a glow of smugness at the thought that, deficient though he himself might be in the area of materializing out of fireplaces, there had never been a murder in any of the government departments under *his* charge. . . . Not yet, anyway . . .

While the Prime Minister surreptitiously touched the wood of his desk, Fudge continued, “But Black’s by-the-by now. The point is,

we're at war, Prime Minister, and steps must be taken."

"At war?" repeated the Prime Minister nervously. "Surely that's a little bit of an overstatement?"

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has now been joined by those of his followers who broke out of Azkaban in January," said Fudge, speaking more and more rapidly and twirling his bowler so fast that it was a lime-green blur. "Since they have moved into the open, they have been wreaking havoc. The Brockdale Bridge — he did it, Prime Minister, he threatened a mass Muggle killing unless I stood aside for him and —"

"Good grief, so it's *your* fault those people were killed and I'm having to answer questions about rusted rigging and corroded expansion joints and I don't know what else!" said the Prime Minister furiously.

"*My* fault!" said Fudge, coloring up. "Are you saying you would have caved in to blackmail like that?"

"Maybe not," said the Prime Minister, standing up and striding about the room, "but I would have put all my efforts into catching the blackmailer before he committed any such atrocity!"

"Do you really think I wasn't already making every effort?" demanded Fudge heatedly. "Every Auror in the Ministry was — and is — trying to find him and round up his followers, but we happen to be talking about one of the most powerful wizards of all time, a wizard who has eluded capture for almost three decades!"

"So I suppose you're going to tell me he caused the hurricane in the West Country too?" said the Prime Minister, his temper rising with every pace he took. It was infuriating to discover the reason for

all these terrible disasters and not to be able to tell the public, almost worse than it being the government's fault after all.

"That was no hurricane," said Fudge miserably.

"Excuse me!" barked the Prime Minister, now positively stamping up and down. "Trees uprooted, roofs ripped off, lampposts bent, horrible injuries —"

"It was the Death Eaters," said Fudge. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's followers. And . . . and we suspect giant involvement."

The Prime Minister stopped in his tracks as though he had hit an invisible wall. "*What* involvement?"

Fudge grimaced. "He used giants last time, when he wanted to go for the grand effect," he said. "The Office of Misinformation has been working around the clock, we've had teams of Obliviators out trying to modify the memories of all the Muggles who saw what really happened, we've got most of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures running around Somerset, but we can't find the giant — it's been a disaster."

"You don't say!" said the Prime Minister furiously.

"I won't deny that morale is pretty low at the Ministry," said Fudge. "What with all that, and then losing Amelia Bones."

"Losing who?"

"Amelia Bones. Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. We think He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named may have murdered her in person, because she was a very gifted witch and — and all the evidence was that she put up a real fight."

Fudge cleared his throat and, with an effort, it seemed, stopped spinning his bowler hat.

“But that murder was in the newspapers,” said the Prime Minister, momentarily diverted from his anger. “*Our* newspapers. Amelia Bones . . . it just said she was a middle-aged woman who lived alone. It was a — a nasty killing, wasn’t it? It’s had rather a lot of publicity. The police are baffled, you see.”

Fudge sighed. “Well, of course they are,” he said. “Killed in a room that was locked from the inside, wasn’t she? We, on the other hand, know exactly who did it, not that that gets us any further toward catching him. And then there was Emmeline Vance, maybe you didn’t hear about that one —”

“Oh yes I did!” said the Prime Minister. “It happened just around the corner from here, as a matter of fact. The papers had a field day with it, ‘breakdown of law and order in the Prime Minister’s backyard —’”

“And as if all that wasn’t enough,” said Fudge, barely listening to the Prime Minister, “we’ve got dementors swarming all over the place, attacking people left, right, and center. . . .”

Once upon a happier time this sentence would have been unintelligible to the Prime Minister, but he was wiser now.

“I thought dementors guard the prisoners in Azkaban,” he said cautiously.

“They did,” said Fudge wearily. “But not anymore. They’ve deserted the prison and joined He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. I won’t pretend that wasn’t a blow.”

“But,” said the Prime Minister, with a sense of dawning horror, “didn’t you tell me they’re the creatures that drain hope and happiness out of people?”

“That’s right. And they’re breeding. That’s what’s causing all this mist.”

The Prime Minister sank, weak-kneed, into the nearest chair. The idea of invisible creatures swooping through the towns and countryside, spreading despair and hopelessness in his voters, made him feel quite faint.

“Now see here, Fudge — you’ve got to do something! It’s your responsibility as Minister of Magic!”

“My dear Prime Minister, you can’t honestly think I’m still Minister of Magic after all this? I was sacked three days ago! The whole Wizarding community has been screaming for my resignation for a fortnight. I’ve never known them so united in my whole term of office!” said Fudge, with a brave attempt at a smile.

The Prime Minister was momentarily lost for words. Despite his indignation at the position into which he had been placed, he still rather felt for the shrunken-looking man sitting opposite him.

“I’m very sorry,” he said finally. “If there’s anything I can do?”

“It’s very kind of you, Prime Minister, but there is nothing. I was sent here tonight to bring you up to date on recent events and to introduce you to my successor. I rather thought he’d be here by now, but of course, he’s very busy at the moment, with so much going on.”

Fudge looked around at the portrait of the ugly little man wearing the long curly silver wig, who was digging in his ear with the point of a quill. Catching Fudge’s eye, the portrait said, “He’ll be here in a moment, he’s just finishing a letter to Dumbledore.”

“I wish him luck,” said Fudge, sounding bitter for the first time. “I’ve been writing to Dumbledore twice a day for the past fortnight,

but he won't budge. If he'd just been prepared to persuade the boy, I might still be . . . Well, maybe Scrimgeour will have more success."

Fudge subsided into what was clearly an aggrieved silence, but it was broken almost immediately by the portrait, which suddenly spoke in its crisp, official voice.

"To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Requesting a meeting. Urgent. Kindly respond immediately. Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic."

"Yes, yes, fine," said the Prime Minister distractedly, and he barely flinched as the flames in the grate turned emerald green again, rose up, and revealed a second spinning wizard in their heart, disgorging him moments later onto the antique rug.

Fudge got to his feet and, after a moment's hesitation, the Prime Minister did the same, watching the new arrival straighten up, dust down his long black robes, and look around.

The Prime Minister's first, foolish thought was that Rufus Scrimgeour looked rather like an old lion. There were streaks of gray in his mane of tawny hair and his bushy eyebrows; he had keen yellowish eyes behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles and a certain rangy, loping grace even though he walked with a slight limp. There was an immediate impression of shrewdness and toughness; the Prime Minister thought he understood why the Wizarding community preferred Scrimgeour to Fudge as a leader in these dangerous times.

"How do you do?" said the Prime Minister politely, holding out his hand.

Scrimgeour grasped it briefly, his eyes scanning the room, then pulled out a wand from under his robes.

“Fudge told you everything?” he asked, striding over to the door and tapping the keyhole with his wand. The Prime Minister heard the lock click.

“Er — yes,” said the Prime Minister. “And if you don’t mind, I’d rather that door remained unlocked.”

“I’d rather not be interrupted,” said Scrimgeour shortly, “or watched,” he added, pointing his wand at the windows, so that the curtains swept across them. “Right, well, I’m a busy man, so let’s get down to business. First of all, we need to discuss your security.”

The Prime Minister drew himself up to his fullest height and replied, “I am perfectly happy with the security I’ve already got, thank you very —”

“Well, we’re not,” Scrimgeour cut in. “It’ll be a poor lookout for the Muggles if their Prime Minister gets put under the Imperius Curse. The new secretary in your outer office —”

“I’m not getting rid of Kingsley Shacklebolt, if that’s what you’re suggesting!” said the Prime Minister hotly. “He’s highly efficient, gets through twice the work the rest of them —”

“That’s because he’s a wizard,” said Scrimgeour, without a flicker of a smile. “A highly trained Auror, who has been assigned to you for your protection.”

“Now, wait a moment!” declared the Prime Minister. “You can’t just put your people into my office, I decide who works for me —”

“I thought you were happy with Shacklebolt?” said Scrimgeour coldly.

“I am — that’s to say, I was —”

“Then there’s no problem, is there?” said Scrimgeour.

“I . . . well, as long as Shackbolt’s work continues to be . . . er . . . excellent,” said the Prime Minister lamely, but Scrimgeour barely seemed to hear him.

“Now, about Herbert Chorley, your Junior Minister,” he continued. “The one who has been entertaining the public by impersonating a duck.”

“What about him?” asked the Prime Minister.

“He has clearly reacted to a poorly performed Imperius Curse,” said Scrimgeour. “It’s addled his brains, but he could still be dangerous.”

“He’s only quacking!” said the Prime Minister weakly. “Surely a bit of a rest . . . Maybe go easy on the drink . . .”

“A team of Healers from St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries are examining him as we speak. So far he has attempted to strangle three of them,” said Scrimgeour. “I think it best that we remove him from Muggle society for a while.”

“I . . . well . . . He’ll be all right, won’t he?” said the Prime Minister anxiously.

Scrimgeour merely shrugged, already moving back toward the fireplace.

“Well, that’s really all I had to say. I will keep you posted of developments, Prime Minister — or, at least, I shall probably be too busy to come personally, in which case I shall send Fudge here. He has consented to stay on in an advisory capacity.”

Fudge attempted to smile, but was unsuccessful; he merely looked as though he had a toothache. Scrimgeour was already rummaging in his pocket for the mysterious powder that turned the fire green. The

Prime Minister gazed hopelessly at the pair of them for a moment, then the words he had fought to suppress all evening burst from him at last.

“But for heaven’s sake — you’re *wizards*! You can do *magic*! Surely you can sort out — well — *anything*!”

Scrimgeour turned slowly on the spot and exchanged an incredulous look with Fudge, who really did manage a smile this time as he said kindly, “The trouble is, the other side can do magic too, Prime Minister.”

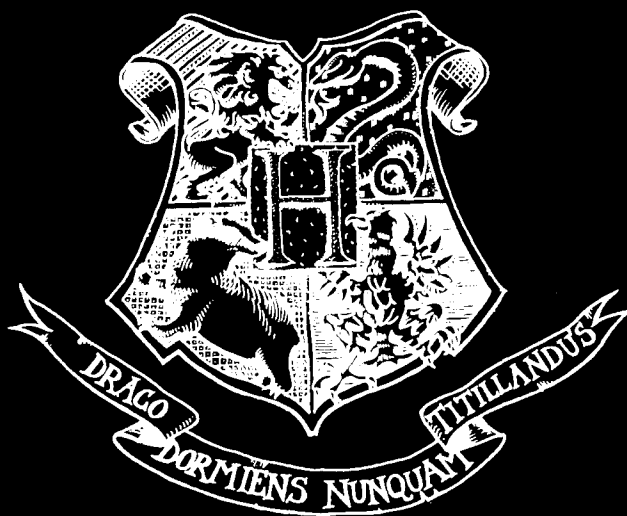
And with that, the two wizards stepped one after the other into the bright green fire and vanished.

*Titels verkrygbaar in die Harry Potter-reeks
(In leesvolgorde)*

Harry Potter en die Towenaar se Steen
Harry Potter en die Kamer van Geheimenisse
Harry Potter en die Gevangene van Azkaban
Harry Potter en die Beker Vol Vuur
Harry Potter en die Orde van die Feniks
Harry Potter en die Halfbloed Prins

HARRY POTTER

en die Halfbloed Prins



J.K. Rowling
Vertaal deur Kobus Geldenhuys



Human & Rousseau
Kaapstad Pretoria

*Aan Mackenzie,
my pragtige dogter,
dra ek haar ink-en-papier-tweeling op*

*Hoofkarakters en ander name is na die oorspronklike
Engels verander soos deur die huidige kontrak bepaal*

Oorspronklike titel: *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*

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Harry Potter, name, karakters, en verwante kentekens is handelsmerke van en

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Geen gedeelte van hierdie boek mag sonder die skriftelike verlot
van die uitgewer gereproduseer of in enige vorm of deur enige
elektroniese of meganiese middel weergegee word nie, hetsy deur
fotokopiëring, skyf- of bandopname, of deur enige ander stelsel
van inligtingsbewaring

Die Ander Minister

Dit is amper middernag. Die Eerste Minister sit alleen in sy kantoor en lees 'n lang memo wat deur sy brein gly sonder om die geringste spoor van betekenis agter te laat. Hy wag vir 'n oproep van die president van 'n verafgeleë land, en tussen al sy pogings om die onaangename herinneringe aan 'n baie lang, uitputtende en moeilike week te onderdruk, is daar nie veel ruimte vir enigiets anders in sy kop nie. Hoe meer hy op die woorde op die bladsy voor hom probeer konsentreer, hoe duideliker sien die Eerste Minister die leedvermakerige gesig van een van sy politieke opponente. Hierdie spesifieke opponent het vanoggend nog op die nuus verskyn, nie net om al die aaklige dinge wat die afgelope week gebeur het (asof enigiemand daaraan herinner hoef te word), op te noem nie, maar ook om te verduidelik hoekom elke enkele een daarvan die regering se skuld was.

Net die gedagte aan hierdie aantygings sit die Eerste Minister se pols op loop, want nie een daarvan is regverdig of waar nie. Hoe op aarde was sy regering veronderstel om te keer dat daardie brug inmekaar stort? Dit is verregaande vir enigiemand om te kenne te gee dat hulle nie genoeg op brûe spandeer nie. Die brug was minder as 'n jaar oud en die beste kenners kan nie verklaar hoekom dit so netjies in twee gebreek en 'n dosyn motors in die rivier se diep waters laat afstort het nie. En hoe durf enigiemand insinueer die tekort aan polisiemanne het gelei tot daardie twee gruwelmoorde wat soveel opspraak verwek het? Of dat die regering die fratsorkaan in die weste van die land, wat soveel skade aan sowel mens as eiendom aangerig het, op die een of ander manier moes voorsien het? En is dit nou sy skuld dat een van sy junior ministers, Herbert Chorley, juis hierdie week gekies het om so eienaardig op te tree dat hy nou baie meer tyd saam met sy gesin gaan deurbring?

“Daar heers 'n somber atmosfeer in ons land,” het sy opponent afgesluit terwyl hy sy breë glimlag skaars kon wegsteek.

En ongelukkig is dit heeltemal waar. Die Eerste Minister kan dit

self ook aanvoel; mense lyk meer mismoedig as gewoonlik. Selfs die weer is trietserig; ysige mis in die middel van Julie ... Dis nie reg nie, dis nie normaal nie ...

Hy blaai om na die memo se tweede bladsy, sien hoe lank dit nog aangaan en gee moed op. Hy strek sy arms bo sy kop uit en kyk treurig na sy kantoor. Dit is 'n swierige vertrek met 'n mooi marmerkaggel teen die muur oorkant die lang skuifraamvensters wat dig toegemaak is om die ontydige koue uit te hou. Met 'n effense rilling staan die Eerste Minister op, beweeg na die vensters en kyk uit na die dun mislierte wat teen die ruit vaswaai. En toe, terwyl hy met sy rug na die vertrek toe staan, hoor hy 'n sagte hoesie agter hom.

Hy verstar, van aangesig tot aangesig met sy eie angsbevange weerkaatsing in die donker glas. Hy ken daardie hoesie. Hy het dit al vantevore gehoor. Hy draai baie stadig om en kyk na die leë vertrek.

"Hallo?" sê hy en probeer dapperder klink as wat hy voel.

Vir 'n vlietende oomblik gun hy homself die onmoontlike hoop dat niemand hom sal antwoord nie. Maar 'n stem antwoord onmiddellik; 'n helder, besliste stem wat klink asof dit 'n voorbereide persverklaring lees. Dit behoort – soos wat die Eerste Minister al met die eerste hoesie geweet het – aan 'n padda-agtige mannetjie wat 'n lang silwer pruik dra en woon in 'n klein, vuil olieversportret wat in die verste hoek van die vertrek hang.

"Aan die Moggels se Eerste Minister. Ons moet dringend ontmoet. Reageer asseblief onmiddellik. Met dank, Fudge." Die man in die portret kyk die Eerste Minister vraend aan.

"E," sê die Eerste Minister, "luister ... dis nie nou 'n geleë tyd vir my nie ... Ek wag vir 'n foonoproep, sien jy ... van die president van –"

"Dit kan gereël word," sê die portret dadelik. Die Eerste Minister se hart sak in sy skoene. Dis presies waarvoor hy bang was.

"Maar ek het werklik gehoop om met hom te praat."

"Ons sal reël dat die president vergeet om te bel. Pleks van nou sal hy môre aand bel," sê die mannetjie. "Wees asseblief so vriendelik om onmiddellik op meneer Fudge se versoek te reageer."

"Ek ... o ... nou goed dan," sê die Eerste Minister flou. "Ja, ek sal Fudge te woord staan."

Hy beweeg haastig terug na sy lessenaar terwyl hy sy das regtrek. Hy het skaars gaan sit en probeer om sy gesig ontspanne en ongeërg te laat lyk toe daar groen vlamme uit die leë vuurherd onder die marmerkaggelrak opskiet. Hy kyk en probeer om nie 'n sweem van verrassing of onrus te toon nie terwyl 'n gesette man al tollende in die vlamme verskyn. Sekondes later klim hy uit op die taamlike

duur antieke mat, stof as van sy lang strepiesmantel se moue af en staan daar met 'n lemmetjiegroen bolhoed in sy hand.

"A ... Eerste Minister," sê Cornelius Fudge en tree vorentoe met 'n uitgestrekte hand. "Goed om u weer te sien."

Die Eerste Minister kan hierdie kompliment nie in alle eerlikheid beantwoord nie en sê daarom maar liewer niks. Hy is hoegenaamd nie bly om Fudge te sien nie, want sy verskynings af en toe is nie net op sigself erg ontstellend nie, maar beteken gewoonlik ook hy gaan binnekort baie slegte nuus kry. Verder lyk Fudge vandag lelik afgerem. Hy is maerder, blesser en gryser, en sy gesig lyk verkreukel. Die Eerste Minister het daardie soort voorkoms al voorheen by politici gesien, en dit is nooit 'n goeie teken nie.

"Hoe kan ek u help?" vra hy terwyl hy Fudge se hand vlugtig skud en na een van die hardste stoele voor die lessenaar beduie.

"Dis moeilik om te weet waar om te begin," brom Fudge. Hy trek die stoel uit, neem plek in en sit sy groen bolhoed op sy knieë neer. "Wat 'n week, wat 'n week ..."

"Ook deur 'n moeilike tydjie?" vra die Eerste Minister styf en hoop om hiermee te kenne te gee dat hy reeds meer as genoeg hooi op sy vurk het sonder dat Fudge ook nog daartoe bydra.

"Ja, natuurlik," sê Fudge terwyl hy sy oë moeg vryf en die Eerste Minister somber aankyk. "My week was net so rampspoedig soos u s'n, Eerste Minister. Die Brockdale-brug ... die Bones- en Vance-moorde ... om nie eens te praat van die herrie in die weste van die land nie ..."

"U, e – ek bedoel, party van u mense, was – was betrokke by daardie – daardie dinge, nie waar nie?"

Fudge kyk die Eerste Minister streng aan.

"Natuurlik was hulle," sê hy. "U het tog sekerlik besef wat aangaan?"

"Ek ..." aarsel die Eerste Minister.

Dit is presies hierdie soort gedrag wat hom so 'n weersin in Fudge se besoeke gegee het. Hy is na alles die Eerste Minister en hou nie daarvan dat iemand hom soos 'n dom skoolseun laat voel nie. Maar nou ja, dit gaan nou al só sedert sy heel eerste ontmoeting met Fudge op sy heel eerste aand as Eerste Minister. Hy onthou dit nog soos gister en hy weet dit sal tot sy sterwensdag by hom spook.

Hy het alleen in sy kantoor gestaan en die gevoel van oorwinning geniet wat 'n man ná soveel jare van droom en konkel en knoei smaak toe hy 'n hoesie agter hom hoor, net soos vanaand. Toe hy omdraai, het die lelike klein portret met hom gepraat en aangekondig dat die Minister van Towerkuns binnekort gaan opdaag om homself voor te stel.

Hy het natuurlik gedink die lang politieke veldtog en die spanning van die verkiesing het hom die kluts laat kwytraak. Hy het hom doodgeskrik toe die portret met hom praat, maar dit was niks in vergelyking met hoe hy gevoel het toe 'n selfverklaarde towenaar uit sy kaggel spring en sy hand skud nie. Hy het sprakeloos geluister na Fudge se vriendelike verduideliking dat daar nog steeds oral in die wêreld hekse en towenaars is wat in die geheim lewe en sy herhaalde gerusstellings dat hy nie sy kop oor hulle hoef te breek nie aangesien die Ministerie van Towerkuns verantwoordelikheid aanvaar vir die hele towenaarsgemeenskap en verhoed dat die nietowerbevolking snuf in die neus kry oor hulle. Volgens Fudge was dit 'n moeilike taak wat alles insluit van regulasies oor die verantwoordelike gebruik van besemstokke tot riglyne oor hoe om die draakbevolking in toom te hou (die Eerste Minister onthou hy moes hier aan sy lessenaar vashou op regop te bly staan). Fudge het die steeds dronkgeslaande Eerste Minister toe op 'n vaderlike manier op die skouer geklop.

“Moenie bekommerd wees nie,” het hy gesê. “Tien teen een sien u my nooit weer nie. Ek sal u net pla as daar regtig iets ernstigs aan ons kant gebeur, iets wat die Moggels – oftewel die nietowergemeenskap – sal raak. Andersins handhaaf ons 'n beleid van lewe en laat lewe. En ek moet byvoeg, u hanteer dit aansienlik beter as u voorganger. Hy het my by die venster probeer uitgooi, want hy was vas oortuig die opposisie is besig om hom 'n poets te probeer bak.”

Eers toe kry die Eerste Minister uiteindelik weer sy stem terug.

“U is dus *nie* 'n poets nie?”

Dit was die laaste, desperate strooitjie van hoop waaraan hy vasgeklou het.

“Nee,” sê Fudge saggies. “Nee, ek is bevrees ek is nie. Kyk.”

En net daar verander hy die Eerste Minister se teekoppie in 'n nagmuus.

“Maar,” snak die Eerste Minister uitasem terwyl hy kyk hoe sy teekoppie aan die hoek van sy volgende toespraak knaag, “maar hoekom – hoekom het niemand my hiervan gesê nie?”

“Die Ministerie van Towerkuns openbaar hom- of haarself slegs aan die Moggels se huidige Eerste Minister,” sê Fudge en steek sy towerstaf terug in sy baadjie. “Ons het gevind dit is die beste manier om geheimhouding te handhaaf.”

“Maar hoekom,” kerm die Eerste Minister, “hoekom het die vorige Eerste Minister my dan nie gewaarsku nie?”

Fudge bars uit van die lag.

“My liewe Eerste Minister, gaan u enigiemand ooit hiervan vertel?

Terwyl hy nog grinnik, het Fudge een of ander poeier in die kaggel gegooi, in die smaraggroen vlamme geklim en met ’n swiesj-geluid verdwyn. Die Eerste Minister het net daar gestaan, heeltemal roerloos, en besef hy sou nooit, so lank as wat hy lewe, waag om enigiemand van hierdie ontmoeting te vertel nie, want wie op aarde sal hom glo?

Dit het ’n rukkie geneem voor hy oor die skok gekom het. Hy het homself ’n tyd lank probeer oortuig dat Fudge inderdaad ’n hal-lusinasie was wat veroorsaak is deur ’n gebrek aan slaap gedurende sy uitmergelende verkiesingsveldtog. In ’n vergeefse poging om van alle herinneringe aan hierdie onthutsende ontmoeting ontslae te raak, het hy die nagmuis vir sy oorstelpte susterskind present gegee en sy privaat sekretaris aangesê om die portret van die aaklige mannetjie wat Fudge se koms aangekondig het, af te haal. Tot die Eerste Minister se ontsteltenis was dit egter onmoontlik om die portret te verwyder. Nadat verskeie skrynwerkers, ’n bouer of twee, ’n kunshistorikus en die minister van finansies almal tevergeefs probeer het om dit van die muur af los te kry het die Eerste Minister moed opgegee en besluit om maar te hoop die ding bly vir die res van sy termyn bewegingloos en stil. Af en toe kon hy sweer hy sien die portret se inwoner gaap of sy neus krap. Een of twee keer het hy selfs doodluiters by die portretraam uitgedrentel en niks meer as ’n leë modderbruin skilderdoek agtergelaat nie. Maar hy het homself geleer om nie te veel na die portret te kyk nie en homself altyd streng daaraan te herinner dat sy oë hom parte speel wanneer sulke dinge gebeur.

Maar drie jaar gelede, op ’n aand baie soos vanaand, toe die Eerste Minister alleen in sy kantoor was, het die portret weer aangekondig dat Fudge op pad is. Kort daarna het Fudge vervaard uit die kaggel gespring, papnat en duidelik paniekerig. Voor die Eerste Minister nog kon vra hoekom hy die Axminster-mat so laat nat word, het Fudge begin uitvaar oor ’n tronk waarvan die Eerste Minister nog nooit gehoor het nie, oor ’n man genaamd “Serious” Black, oor iets wat soos Hogwarts geklink het en oor ’n seun genaamd Harry Potter. Niks hiervan het vir die Eerste Minister enige sin gemaak nie.

“... Ek kom nou net van Azkaban af,” hyg Fudge terwyl hy ’n groot klomp water uit die rand van sy bolhoed in sy sak uitgooi. “In die middel van die Noordsee, weet u, onaangename vlug ... Die Dementors is in ’n toestand,” brabbel hy bewend, “want hulle het

niemand nog ooit laat ontsnap nie. Nietemin, ek moes u dadelik kom spreek, Eerste Minister. Black is 'n berugte Moggel-moordenaar en beplan moontlik om weer by Jy-Weet-Wie aan te sluit ... Maar u weet natuurlik nie wie Jy-Weet-Wie is nie!" Hy staar die Eerste Minister 'n oomblik lank moedeloos aan en gaan dan aan: "Wel, sit, sit; ek moet u seker inlig ... Skink vir u 'n whisky ..."

Die Eerste Minister was nogal vies dat iemand hom in sy eie kantoor aansê om te sit en boonop nog van sy eie whisky aanbied, maar hy het nogtans gaan sit. Fudge het sy towerstaf uitgehaal, twee groot glase met 'n amber vloeistof in uit die niet opgetower, een daarvan in die Eerste Minister se hand gedruk en vir homself 'n stoel uitgetrek.

Fudge het langer as 'n uur gepraat. In een stadium het hy verseg om 'n sekere naam hardop te sê en dit in plaas daarvan op 'n stuk perkament neergeskryf wat hy in die Eerste Minister se whiskylose hand gestop het. Toe Fudge uiteindelik opstaan om te loop, het die Eerste Minister ook opgestaan.

"Dus u dink dat ..." Hy loer af na die naam in sy linkerhand. "Die Heer Vol—"

"Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie!" snou Fudge hom toe.

"Ek is jammer ... U dink dus Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie lewe nog?"

"Wel, Dumbledore sê so," antwoord Fudge terwyl hy sy strepiesmantel onder sy ken vasmaak, "maar ons het hom nog nooit opgespoor nie. As u my vra, is hy nie gevaarlik tensy hy hulp het nie en daarom moet ons ons visier op Black stel. U sal dus 'n waarskuwing uitstuur? Uitstekend. Wel, ek hoop ons sien mekaar nie weer nie, Eerste Minister! Goeienag."

Maar hulle hét mekaar weer gesien. Minder as 'n jaar later het 'n beswaarde Fudge uit die bloute in die Kabinetsaal verskyn om die Eerste Minister in kennis te stel dat daar 'n paar probleme by die Kwiddiek (altans, dis hoe dit geklink het) Wêreldbeker was en dat verskeie Moggels 'betrokke' was, maar dat die Eerste Minister hom nie moes bekommer nie, die feit dat Jy-Weet-Wie se Merk weer gesien is, beteken niks nie; Fudge was seker dit was net 'n geïsoleerde insident en die Moggel-Skakelkantoor was ten tye van hul gesprek reeds besig met geheuemodifikasies.

"O, en amper vergeet ek," het Fudge bygevoeg. "Ons voer drie buitelandse drake en 'n sfinks vir die Drietowenaarstoernooi in, blote roetine, maar volgens die Departement van die Regulاسie en Beheer van Magiese Kreature vereis die wetboek dat ek u in kennis moet stel wanneer ons gevaarlike dierasies die land inbring."

"Ek – wat – drake?" stotter die Eerste Minister.

"Ja, drie," sê Fudge. "En 'n sfinks. Wel, goeiedag dan."

Die Eerste Minister het teen sy beterwete gehoop drake en sfinkse sou die ergste wees waarvan hy te hore kom, maar nee. Minder as twee jaar later het Fudge sowaar weer uit die vuur gespring, hierdie keer met nuus van 'n massa-ontsnapping uit Azkaban.

"'n Massa-ontsnapping?" herhaal die Eerste Minister skor.

"Geen rede tot kommer nie, geen rede tot kommer nie!" roep Fudge uit met een voet reeds weer in die vlamme. "Ons sal hulle binne 'n ommesientjie aankeer. Ek het net gedink u behoort daarvan te weet!"

En voor die Eerste Minister "Wag net so 'n oomblik!" kon skree, het Fudge in 'n vlag van groen vonke verdwyn.

Al sê die pers en die opposisie ook wat, die Eerste Minister is nie 'n dom man nie. Dit het hom nie ontgaan dat hulle mekaar nou, ten spyte van Fudge se versekering tydens hul eerste ontmoeting, taamlik dikwels sien en dat Fudge met elke besoek meer verbouereerd lyk nie. Die Eerste Minister het so min moontlik aan die Minister van Towerkuns (of, soos wat hy Fudge altyd in sy kop genoem het, die Ander Minister) gedink, maar hy kon nie help om bang te wees dat Fudge die volgende keer met nóg slegter nuus sou opdaag nie. Daarom is die gesig van Fudge wat weer eens uit die vuur klim en wat so verslons is en so knorrig en verbaas lyk dat die Eerste Minister dan nie weet presies hoekom hy daar is nie, omtrent die ergste ding wat in die loop van die afgelope uiters mistroostige week gebeur het.

"Hoe moet ek weet wat gaan aan in die – e – towenaarsgemeenskap?" snou die Eerste Minister hom nou toe. "Ek regeer 'n land en het op die oomblik oorgenoeg bekommernisse sonder om –"

"Ons het dieselfde bekommernisse," val Fudge hom in die rede. "Die Brockdale-brug het nie verweer nie. Dit was nie regtig 'n orkaan nie. Daardie moorde was nie die werk van Moggels nie. En Herbert Chorley se gesin sal veiliger wees sonder hom. Ons tref tans reëlins om hom na Sint Mungo se Hospitaal vir Magiese Kwinte en Kwale oor te plaas. Dit behoort vanaand afgehandel te wees."

"Wat doen julle? ... Ek is bevrees ek ... Wat?" stamel die Eerste Minister.

Fudge haal diep asem en sê: "Eerste Minister, dit spyt my, maar ek moet u in kennis stel dat hy terug is. Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie is terug."

"Terug? As u sê hy is 'terug' ... bedoel u hy lewe? Ek bedoel –"

Die Eerste Minister tas in sy geheue rond vir detail oor daardie

afgrypslike gesprek drie jaar vantevore toe Fudge hom vertel het van die towenaar wat meer as alle ander gevrees word, die towenaar wat 'n duisend gruweldade gepleeg het voordat hy vyftien jaar gelede op 'n geheimsinnige manier verdwyn het.

“Ja, hy lewe,” antwoord Fudge. “Dis nou te sê – ek weet nie – as 'n mens kan sê iemand wat nie doodgemaak kan word nie, lewe. Ek verstaan dit nie regtig nie en Dumbledore wil dit nie ordentlik verduidelik nie – maar nietemin, hy het beslis 'n liggaam en hy loop rond en praat en moor, dus ek veronderstel, vir die doeleindes van ons gesprek, lewe hy wel, ja.”

Die Eerste Minister weet nie wat om hierop te sê nie, maar 'n hardnekkige gewoonte om goed ingelig te wil lyk oor enige onderwerp wat bespreek word, laat hom naorstiglik soek na enige detail wat hy uit hul vorige gesprekke kan onthou.

“En Serious Black – e – werk hy saam met Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie?”

“Black? Black?” vra Fudge verward terwyl hy sy bolhoed vinnig met sy vingers in die rondte draai. “U bedoel Sirius Black? By Merlin se baard, nee. Black is dood. Dit blyk toe ons was – e – verkeerd oor Black. Hy was toe die hele tyd onskuldig. En hy was ook nie kop in een mus met Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie. Ek bedoel,” voeg hy verdedigend by terwyl hy sy hoed al vinniger om en om draai, “al die getuienis het daarop gedui – ons het meer as vyftig ooggetuies gehad. Maar nietemin, soos ek sê, hy is dood. Trouens, hy is vermoor. Op die Ministerie van Towerkuns se perseel. Daar gaan om die waarheid te sê 'n ondersoek wees ...”

Tot die Eerste Minister se verbasing kry hy Fudge vir 'n oomblik jammer. Hierdie emosie word egter omtrent dadelik oorskadu deur 'n gloed van selfvoldaanheid by die gedagte dat hoewel hy te kort skiet op die gebied van mense wat uit kaggels opdoem, daar nog nooit 'n moord in enige van die regeringsdepartemente was sedert hy aan bewind is nie ... Altans, nog nie ...

Terwyl die Eerste Minister stilletjies aan sy lessenaar se hout vat, gaan Fudge voort: “Maar Black is nou iets van die verlede. Die punt is, daar het nou oorlog uitgebreek, Eerste Minister, en ons moet ernstige stappe neem.”

“Oorlog?” herhaal die Eerste Minister senuweeagtig. “U oordryf tog seker nou?”

“Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie se volgelinge wat in Januarie uit Azkaban ontsnap het, het nou by hom aangesluit,” sê Fudge. Hy praat al vinniger en draai sy bolhoed so vinnig dat dit soos 'n lemmetjiegroen woer-woer lyk. “Vandat hulle te voorskyn getree

het, saai hulle verwoesting. Die Brockdale-brug – dit was sy werk, Eerste Minister. Hy het gedreig om 'n magdom Moggels te vermoor ek vir hom terugstaan en –”

“Goeie genugtig, dan is dit u skuld dat daardie mense vermoor is en dat ek vrae oor 'n verroeste struktuur en verweerde uitsitvoeë en wie weet wat nog alles moet beantwoord!” sê die Eerste Minister woedend.

“My skuld!” roep Fudge rooi in die gesig uit. “Probeer u sê ek moes voor sulke afpersing geswig het?”

“Miskien nie,” sê die Eerste Minister terwyl hy opstaan en in die vertrek begin rondstap. “Maar ek sou alles in die stryd gewerp het om die afperser te vang voor hy sulke gruweldade kon pleeg!”

“Dink u regtigwaar ek het nie alreeds alles moontlik gedoen nie?” vra Fudge ontstoke. “Elke Auror in die Ministerie is – en word nog steeds – gebruik om hom op te spoor en sy volgelingen vas te trek, maar ons praat toevallig hier van een van die magtigste towenaars van alle tye, 'n toewenaar wat ons al amper drie dekades lank ontglip!”

“Dan veronderstel ek u gaan vir my sê hy was ook verantwoordelik vir die orkaan in die weste van die land?” vra die Eerste Minister wat met elke tree wat hy gee nog kwater word. Dit maak hom briesend dat hy nou weet wie agter al hierdie vreeslike rampe sit en dit nie vir die publiek mag sê nie; dit is amper erger as om te moet aanvaar dat dit op die ou end wel alles die regering se skuld was.

“Dit was nie 'n orkaan nie,” sê Fudge mismoedig.

“Verskoon my!” blaf die Eerste Minister wat nou behoorlik op en af marsjeer. “Bome is ontwortel, dakke afgewaai, lamppale omgebui, mense verskriklik beseer –”

“Dit was die Doodseters,” sê Fudge. “Hulle is Hy Wat Nie Ge-noem Mag Word Nie se volgelingen. En ... en ons vermoed daar was reuse ook betrokke.”

Die Eerste Minister steek in sy spore vas asof hy hom in 'n onsigbare muur vasgeloop het.

“Wat was betrokke?”

Fudge grys. “Hy het verlede keer reuse gebruik toe hy 'n groot impak wou maak. Die Kantoor vir Disinformasie werk dag en nag; ons het spanne Uitwissers wat probeer om die Moggels wat gesien het wat regtig gebeur het se geheues te modifiseer en bykans die ganse Departement van die Regulering en Beheer van Magiese Kreature fynkam die Somerset-gebied, maar ons kan die reus nie opspoor nie. Dis 'n ramp.”

“U kan dit weer sê!” roep die Eerste Minister woedend uit.

“Ek ontken nie dat die moreel in die Ministerie taamlík laag is nie,” sê Fudge. “En boonop het ons ook nog vir Amelia Bones verloor.”

“Wie het julle verloor?”

“Amelia Bones, Hoof van die Departement van Magiese Wets-toepassing. Ons vermoed Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie het haar dalk persoonlik vermoor, want sy was ’n besonder begaafde heks en – en al die aanduidings is daar dat sy nie maklik die stryd gewonne gegee het nie.”

Fudge maak sy keel skoon en dwing homself met moeite om op te hou om sy bolhoed in die rondte te draai.

“Maar daardie moord was in die koerante,” sê die Eerste Minister wat vir ’n oomblik van sy woede vergeet. “In *ons* koerante. Amelia Bones ... Hulle het net gesê sy was ’n middeljarige vrou wat alleen gebly het. Dit was ’n – ’n gruwelike moord, nie waar nie? Dit het baie publisiteit gekry. Die polisie is glo dronkgeslaan.”

Fudge sug. “Maar natuurlik is hulle. Sy is vermoor in ’n vertrek wat van binne gesluit was. Ons, daarenteen, weet presies wie dit gedoen het – nie dat dit ons enigszins help om hom te vang nie. En dan was daar Emmeline Vance. Miskien het u nog nie van haar gehoor nie?”

“O ja, ek het!” sê die Eerste Minister. “Dit het in der waarheid net om die hoek hiervandaan gebeur. Die koerante het heerlik te velde getrek daaroor: *Wet en orde stort in duie in die Eerste Minister se agterplaas!*”

“En asof dit alles nie genoeg was nie,” sê Fudge wat skaars na die Eerste Minister luister, “wemel die hele plek van Dementors wat mense links en regs aanval ...”

In gelukkiger tye sou die Eerste Minister hierdie sin nie verstaan het nie, maar nou weet hy van beter.

“Ek dog Dementors bewaak die gevangenes in Azkaban?” vra hy versigtig.

“Hulle het,” sê Fudge moeg. “Maar nie meer nie. Hulle het gedros by die tronk en na Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie oorgeloop. Ek moet erken, dit was ’n swaar slag.”

“Maar,” sê die Eerste Minister met ’n gevoel van naderende afgryse, “het u nie vir my gesê hulle is wesens wat mense van alle hoop en geluk ontnem nie?”

“Dis reg. En hulle is nou besig om aan te teel. Dis hoekom dit so erg mistig is.”

Die Eerste Minister se knieë voel swak en hy sak in die naaste stoel neer. Die gedagte aan onsigbare wesens wat deur dorpe en

stede regoor die land swiep en sy kiesers in wanhoop en vertwyfeling agterlaat, maak hom lighoofdig.

“Luister hier, Fudge – jy moet iets doen! Dit is jou plig as Minister van Towerkuns!”

“My liewe Eerste Minister, dink u regtig ek is ná dese nog die Minister van Towerkuns? Ek is drie dae gelede in die pad gesteeek! Die hele towenaarsgemeenskap het twee weke lank daarop aangedring dat ek bedank. In my ganse termyn as minister het ek hulle nooit so verenig gesien nie!” sê Fudge en probeer dapper glimlag.

Die Eerste Minister weet vir ’n oomblik nie wat om te sê nie. Ondanks sy misnoeë oor die posisie waarin hy geplaas is, het hy simpatie met die ineengekrimpde man wat oorkant hom sit.

“Ek is baie jammer,” sê hy uiteindelik. “Is daar enigiets wat ek kan doen?”

“Dit is baie gaaf van u, Eerste Minister, maar u kan niks doen nie. Ek is vanaand hierheen gestuur om u op hoogte van die jongste gebeure te bring en om u aan my opvolger voor te stel. Ek het gedink hy sou teen dié tyd al hier gewees het, maar hy is natuurlik baie besig op die oomblik, aangesien daar soveel verwikkelinge is.”

Fudge kyk om na die portret van die lelike klein mannetjie met die lang, krullerige silwer pruik en sien hoe hy met ’n veerpen in sy oor krap.

Die portret vang Fudge se oog en sê: “Hy sal nou hier wees. Hy skryf net sy brief aan Dumbledore klaar.”

“Ek wens hom voorspoed toe,” sê Fudge en klink vir die eerste keer bitter. “Ek skryf al die afgelope twee weke twee keer ’n dag vir Dumbledore, maar hy wil nie kopgee nie. As hy bereid was om die seun om te praat, sou ek dalk nog ... Wel, miskien sal Scrimgeour meer sukses behaal.”

Fudge onttrek hom in wat duidelik ’n gekrenkte stilte is, maar dit word feitlik dadelik verbreek deur die portret wat skielik in sy helder amptelike stem praat.

“Aan die Moggels se Eerste Minister. Versoek ’n ontmoeting. Dringend. Reageer asseblief onmiddellik. Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister van Towerkuns.”

“Ja, ja, goed,” sê die Eerste Minister afgetrokke en hy verroer skaars ’n spier toe die vlamme in die vuurherd weer smaraggroen word, opvlam en ’n tweede tollende towenaar te voorskyn bring en oomblikke later op die antieke mat uitspoeg. Fudge kom op sy voete en ná ’n effense huiwering doen die Eerste Minister dieselfde en kyk hoe die nuwe aankomeling regop kom, sy lang, donker mantel afstof en om hom rondkyk.

Die Eerste Minister se eerste absurde gedagte is dat Rufus Scrimgeour nogal baie soos 'n ou leeu lyk. Daar is strepies grys in sy geelbruin maanhare en sy welige wenkbroue; agter sy draadraambрил is daar twee vurige geel oë en alhoewel hy effens mank is, loop hy met lang, lenige hale. 'n Mens kan dadelik sien die man is skerpsinnig en vasberade; die Eerste Minister kan verstaan hoekom die towenaarsgemeenskap in hierdie gevaarlike tye vir Scrimgeour bo Fudge as leier verkies.

“Bly te kenne,” sê die Eerste Minister beleefd en hou sy hand uit.

Scrimgeour skud dit vlugtig terwyl sy oë oor die vertrek dwaal. Dan bring hy 'n towerstaf van onder sy kleed te voorskyn.

“Het Fudge u alles vertel?” vra hy, stap na die deur en raak met sy towerstaf aan die sleutelgat. Die Eerste Minister hoor die slot klik.

“E – ja,” sê die Eerste Minister. “En as u nie omgee nie, sal ek verkies dat die deur ongesluit bly.”

“Ek verkies om nie onderbreek te word nie,” antwoord Scrimgeour kortaf, “en ook om nie dopgehou te word nie,” voeg hy by en rig sy towerstaf op die vensters sodat die gordyne daarvoor toegaan. “Reg, ek is 'n besige man; kan ons dus ter sake kom. Eerstens moet ons oor u veiligheid praat.”

Die Eerste Minister rig hom tot sy volle lengte op en antwoord: “Ek is heeltemal tevrede met die bestaande veiligheidsmaatreëls, dankie, en –”

“Wel, ons is nie,” onderbreek Scrimgeour. “Die Moggels sal in 'n toestand wees as hul Eerste Minister deur die Imperius-vloek getref word. Die nuwe sekretaris in u algemene kantoor –”

“Ek gaan nie van Kingsley Schacklebolt ontslae raak nie, as dit is waarop u afstuur!” sê die Eerste Minister kwaad. “Hy is uiters bekwaam, doen dubbeld soveel werk as die res van hulle en –”

“Dis omdat hy 'n towenaar is,” sê Scrimgeour sonder 'n sweem van 'n glimlag. “'n Hoogs opgeleide Auror wat aangestel is om u te beskerm.”

“Wag 'n bietjie!” sê die Eerste Minister verontwaardig. “Julle kan nie net julle mense in my kantoor plant nie. Ek besluit wie vir my werk!”

“Ek dag dan u is so tevrede met Schacklebolt?” vra Scrimgeour suur.

“Ek is – ek bedoel, ek was.”

“Dan's daar mos nie 'n probleem nie?” vra Scrimgeour.

“Ek ... wel, solank as wat Schacklebolt se werk so e – uitstekend bly,” sê die Eerste Minister half verskonend, maar Scrimgeour hoor hom skaars.

“Nou goed, wat betref Herbert Chorley – u junior minister,” gaan hy aan. “Die een wat die publiek vermaak het deur soos ’n eend te kere te gaan.”

“Wat van hom?” vra die Eerste Minister.

“Sy gedrag was duidelik die reaksie op ’n swak uitgevoerde Imperius-vloek,” sê Scrimgeour. “Dit het sy kop laat uithaak, maar hy kan nog steeds gevaarlik wees.”

“Hy kwaak maar net,” sê die Eerste Minister flou. “’n Bietjie rus sal tog sekerlik ... En miskien moet hy effens minder drink ...”

“’n Span Genesers by Sint Mungo se Hospitaal vir Magiese Kwinte en Kwale ondersoek hom terwyl ons nou hier praat. Tot dusver het hy al drie van hulle probeer verwurg,” sê Scrimgeour. “Ek dink dit sal beter wees om hom vir ’n tyd lank uit die Moggel-gemeenskap te verwyder.”

“Ek ... wel ... hy sal weer herstel, dan nie?” vra die Eerste Minister angstig. Scrimgeour haal eenvoudig sy skouers op en beweeg terug na die kaggel.

“Wel, dis eintlik al wat ek te sê het. Ek sal u op hoogte hou van enige verwickelinge, Eerste Minister – altans, ek sal moontlik te besig wees om persoonlik te kom, in welke geval ek Fudge hierheen sal stuur. Hy het ingestem om in ’n adviserende kapasiteit aan te bly.”

Fudge probeer glimlag, maar kry dit nie reg nie; dit lyk kompleteet of hy tandpyn het. Scrimgeour soek al klaar in sy sak na die geheim-sinnige poeier wat die vuur laat groen word. Die Eerste Minister staar ’n oomblik mismoedig na die twee van hulle, en dan borrel die woorde wat hy al heelaand lank probeer onderdruk uit hom.

“Maar my liewe hemel – julle is *towenaars*! Julle het *towerkrag*! Julle kan tog sekerlik *enigiets* regtoor?”

Scrimgeour draai stadig om en staan en kyk in ongeloof na Fudge wat dit dié keer sowaar regkry om te glimlag terwyl hy vriendelik sê: “Die probleem is, die ander kant het ook towerkrag, Eerste Minister.”

En met dié betree die twee towenaars die een ná die ander, die heldergroen vuur en verdwyn.



CHAPTER TWO



SPINNER'S END

Many miles away the chilly mist that had pressed against the Prime Minister's windows drifted over a dirty river that wound between overgrown, rubbish-strewn banks. An immense chimney, relic of a disused mill, reared up, shadowy and ominous. There was no sound apart from the whisper of the black water and no sign of life apart from a scrawny fox that had slunk down the bank to nose hopefully at some old fish-and-chip wrappings in the tall grass.

But then, with a very faint *pop*, a slim, hooded figure appeared out of thin air on the edge of the river. The fox froze, wary eyes fixed upon this strange new phenomenon. The figure seemed to take its bearings for a few moments, then set off with light, quick strides, its long cloak rustling over the grass.

With a second and louder *pop*, another hooded figure materialized.

“Wait!”

The harsh cry startled the fox, now crouching almost flat in the undergrowth. It leapt from its hiding place and up the bank. There was a flash of green light, a yelp, and the fox fell back to the ground, dead.

The second figure turned over the animal with its toe.

“Just a fox,” said a woman’s voice dismissively from under the hood. “I thought perhaps an Auror — Cissy, wait!”

But her quarry, who had paused and looked back at the flash of light, was already scrambling up the bank the fox had just fallen down.

“Cissy — Narcissa — listen to me —”

The second woman caught the first and seized her arm, but the other wrenched it away.

“Go back, Bella!”

“You must listen to me!”

“I’ve listened already. I’ve made my decision. Leave me alone!”

The woman named Narcissa gained the top of the bank, where a line of old railings separated the river from a narrow, cobbled street. The other woman, Bella, followed at once. Side by side they stood looking across the road at the rows and rows of dilapidated brick houses, their windows dull and blind in the darkness.

“He lives here?” asked Bella in a voice of contempt. “*Here?* In this Muggle dunghill? We must be the first of our kind ever to set foot —”

But Narcissa was not listening; she had slipped through a gap in

the rusty railings and was already hurrying across the road.

“Cissy, *wait!*”

Bella followed, her cloak streaming behind, and saw Narcissa darting through an alley between the houses into a second, almost identical street. Some of the streetlamps were broken; the two women were running between patches of light and deep darkness. The pursuer caught up with her prey just as she turned another corner, this time succeeding in catching hold of her arm and swinging her around so that they faced each other.

“Cissy, you must not do this, you can’t trust him —”

“The Dark Lord trusts him, doesn’t he?”

“The Dark Lord is . . . I believe . . . mistaken,” Bella panted, and her eyes gleamed momentarily under her hood as she looked around to check that they were indeed alone. “In any case, we were told not to speak of the plan to anyone. This is a betrayal of the Dark Lord’s —”

“Let go, Bella!” snarled Narcissa, and she drew a wand from beneath her cloak, holding it threateningly in the other’s face. Bella merely laughed.

“Cissy, your own sister? You wouldn’t —”

“There is nothing I wouldn’t do anymore!” Narcissa breathed, a note of hysteria in her voice, and as she brought down the wand like a knife, there was another flash of light. Bella let go of her sister’s arm as though burned.

“*Narcissa!*”

But Narcissa had rushed ahead. Rubbing her hand, her pursuer followed again, keeping her distance now, as they moved deeper into

the deserted labyrinth of brick houses. At last, Narcissa hurried up a street named Spinner's End, over which the towering mill chimney seemed to hover like a giant admonitory finger. Her footsteps echoed on the cobbles as she passed boarded and broken windows, until she reached the very last house, where a dim light glimmered through the curtains in a downstairs room.

She had knocked on the door before Bella, cursing under her breath, had caught up. Together they stood waiting, panting slightly, breathing in the smell of the dirty river that was carried to them on the night breeze. After a few seconds, they heard movement behind the door and it opened a crack. A sliver of a man could be seen looking out at them, a man with long black hair parted in curtains around a sallow face and black eyes.

Narcissa threw back her hood. She was so pale that she seemed to shine in the darkness; the long blonde hair streaming down her back gave her the look of a drowned person.

"Narcissa!" said the man, opening the door a little wider, so that the light fell upon her and her sister too. "What a pleasant surprise!"

"Severus," she said in a strained whisper. "May I speak to you? It's urgent."

"But of course."

He stood back to allow her to pass him into the house. Her still-hooded sister followed without invitation.

"Snape," she said curtly as she passed him.

"Bellatrix," he replied, his thin mouth curling into a slightly mocking smile as he closed the door with a snap behind them.

They had stepped directly into a tiny sitting room, which had the

feeling of a dark, padded cell. The walls were completely covered in books, most of them bound in old black or brown leather; a threadbare sofa, an old armchair, and a rickety table stood grouped together in a pool of dim light cast by a candle-filled lamp hung from the ceiling. The place had an air of neglect, as though it was not usually inhabited.

Snape gestured Narcissa to the sofa. She threw off her cloak, cast it aside, and sat down, staring at her white and trembling hands clasped in her lap. Bellatrix lowered her hood more slowly. Dark as her sister was fair, with heavily lidded eyes and a strong jaw, she did not take her gaze from Snape as she moved to stand behind Narcissa.

“So, what can I do for you?” Snape asked, settling himself in the armchair opposite the two sisters.

“We . . . we are alone, aren’t we?” Narcissa asked quietly.

“Yes, of course. Well, Wormtail’s here, but we’re not counting vermin, are we?”

He pointed his wand at the wall of books behind him and with a bang, a hidden door flew open, revealing a narrow staircase upon which a small man stood frozen.

“As you have clearly realized, Wormtail, we have guests,” said Snape lazily.

The man crept, hunchbacked, down the last few steps and moved into the room. He had small, watery eyes, a pointed nose, and wore an unpleasant simper. His left hand was caressing his right, which looked as though it was encased in a bright silver glove.

“Narcissa!” he said, in a squeaky voice. “And Bellatrix! How charming —”

“Wormtail will get us drinks, if you’d like them,” said Snape.
“And then he will return to his bedroom.”

Wormtail winced as though Snape had thrown something at him.

“I am not your servant!” he squeaked, avoiding Snape’s eye.

“Really? I was under the impression that the Dark Lord placed you here to assist me.”

“To assist, yes — but not to make you drinks and — and clean your house!”

“I had no idea, Wormtail, that you were craving more dangerous assignments,” said Snape silkily. “This can be easily arranged: I shall speak to the Dark Lord —”

“I can speak to him myself if I want to!”

“Of course you can,” said Snape, sneering. “But in the meantime, bring us drinks. Some of the elf-made wine will do.”

Wormtail hesitated for a moment, looking as though he might argue, but then turned and headed through a second hidden door. They heard banging and a clinking of glasses. Within seconds he was back, bearing a dusty bottle and three glasses upon a tray. He dropped these on the rickety table and scurried from their presence, slamming the book-covered door behind him.

Snape poured out three glasses of bloodred wine and handed two of them to the sisters. Narcissa murmured a word of thanks, whilst Bellatrix said nothing, but continued to glower at Snape. This did not seem to discompose him; on the contrary, he looked rather amused.

“The Dark Lord,” he said, raising his glass and draining it.

The sisters copied him. Snape refilled their glasses. As Narcissa took her second drink she said in a rush, “Severus, I’m sorry to come

here like this, but I had to see you. I think you are the only one who can help me —”

Snape held up a hand to stop her, then pointed his wand again at the concealed staircase door. There was a loud bang and a squeal, followed by the sound of Wormtail scurrying back up the stairs.

“My apologies,” said Snape. “He has lately taken to listening at doors, I don’t know what he means by it. . . . You were saying, Narcissa?”

She took a great, shuddering breath and started again.

“Severus, I know I ought not to be here, I have been told to say nothing to anyone, but —”

“Then you ought to hold your tongue!” snarled Bellatrix. “Particularly in present company!”

“‘Present company’?” repeated Snape sardonically. “And what am I to understand by that, Bellatrix?”

“That I don’t trust you, Snape, as you very well know!”

Narcissa let out a noise that might have been a dry sob and covered her face with her hands. Snape set his glass down upon the table and sat back again, his hands upon the arms of his chair, smiling into Bellatrix’s glowering face.

“Narcissa, I think we ought to hear what Bellatrix is bursting to say; it will save tedious interruptions. Well, continue, Bellatrix,” said Snape. “Why is it that you do not trust me?”

“A hundred reasons!” she said loudly, striding out from behind the sofa to slam her glass upon the table. “Where to start! Where were you when the Dark Lord fell? Why did you never make any attempt to find him when he vanished? What have you been doing all these

years that you've lived in Dumbledore's pocket? Why did you stop the Dark Lord procuring the Sorcerer's Stone? Why did you not return at once when the Dark Lord was reborn? Where were you a few weeks ago when we battled to retrieve the prophecy for the Dark Lord? And why, Snape, is Harry Potter still alive, when you have had him at your mercy for five years?"

She paused, her chest rising and falling rapidly, the color high in her cheeks. Behind her, Narcissa sat motionless, her face still hidden in her hands.

Snape smiled.

"Before I answer you — oh yes, Bellatrix, I am going to answer! You can carry my words back to the others who whisper behind my back, and carry false tales of my treachery to the Dark Lord! Before I answer you, I say, let me ask a question in turn. Do you really think that the Dark Lord has not asked me each and every one of those questions? And do you really think that, had I not been able to give satisfactory answers, I would be sitting here talking to you?"

She hesitated.

"I know he believes you, but . . ."

"You think he is mistaken? Or that I have somehow hoodwinked him? Fooled the Dark Lord, the greatest wizard, the most accomplished Legilimens the world has ever seen?"

Bellatrix said nothing, but looked, for the first time, a little discomfited. Snape did not press the point. He picked up his drink again, sipped it, and continued, "You ask where I was when the Dark Lord fell. I was where he had ordered me to be, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, because he wished me to spy upon Albus

Dumbledore. You know, I presume, that it was on the Dark Lord's orders that I took up the post?"

She nodded almost imperceptibly and then opened her mouth, but Snape forestalled her.

"You ask why I did not attempt to find him when he vanished. For the same reason that Avery, Yaxley, the Carrows, Greyback, Lucius" — he inclined his head slightly to Narcissa — "and many others did not attempt to find him. I believed him finished. I am not proud of it, I was wrong, but there it is. . . . If he had not forgiven we who lost faith at that time, he would have very few followers left."

"He'd have me!" said Bellatrix passionately. "I, who spent many years in Azkaban for him!"

"Yes, indeed, most admirable," said Snape in a bored voice. "Of course, you weren't a lot of use to him in prison, but the gesture was undoubtedly fine —"

"Gesture!" she shrieked; in her fury she looked slightly mad. "While I endured the dementors, you remained at Hogwarts, comfortably playing Dumbledore's pet!"

"Not quite," said Snape calmly. "He wouldn't give me the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, you know. Seemed to think it might, ah, bring about a relapse . . . tempt me into my old ways."

"This was your sacrifice for the Dark Lord, not to teach your favorite subject?" she jeered. "Why did you stay there all that time, Snape? Still spying on Dumbledore for a master you believed dead?"

"Hardly," said Snape, "although the Dark Lord is pleased that I never deserted my post: I had sixteen years of information on Dumbledore to give him when he returned, a rather more useful

welcome-back present than endless reminiscences of how unpleasant Azkaban is. . . .”

“But you stayed —”

“Yes, Bellatrix, I stayed,” said Snape, betraying a hint of impatience for the first time. “I had a comfortable job that I preferred to a stint in Azkaban. They were rounding up the Death Eaters, you know. Dumbledore’s protection kept me out of jail; it was most convenient and I used it. I repeat: The Dark Lord does not complain that I stayed, so I do not see why you do.

“I think you next wanted to know,” he pressed on, a little more loudly, for Bellatrix showed every sign of interrupting, “why I stood between the Dark Lord and the Sorcerer’s Stone. That is easily answered. He did not know whether he could trust me. He thought, like you, that I had turned from faithful Death Eater to Dumbledore’s stooge. He was in a pitiable condition, very weak, sharing the body of a mediocre wizard. He did not dare reveal himself to a former ally if that ally might turn him over to Dumbledore or the Ministry. I deeply regret that he did not trust me. He would have returned to power three years sooner. As it was, I saw only greedy and unworthy Quirrell attempting to steal the stone and, I admit, I did all I could to thwart him.”

Bellatrix’s mouth twisted as though she had taken an unpleasant dose of medicine.

“But you didn’t return when he came back, you didn’t fly back to him at once when you felt the Dark Mark burn —”

“Correct. I returned two hours later. I returned on Dumbledore’s orders.”

“On Dumbledore’s — ?” she began, in tones of outrage.

“Think!” said Snape, impatient again. “Think! By waiting two hours, just two hours, I ensured that I could remain at Hogwarts as a spy! By allowing Dumbledore to think that I was only returning to the Dark Lord’s side because I was ordered to, I have been able to pass information on Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix ever since! Consider, Bellatrix: The Dark Mark had been growing stronger for months. I knew he must be about to return, all the Death Eaters knew! I had plenty of time to think about what I wanted to do, to plan my next move, to escape like Karkaroff, didn’t I?”

“The Dark Lord’s initial displeasure at my lateness vanished entirely, I assure you, when I explained that I remained faithful, although Dumbledore thought I was his man. Yes, the Dark Lord thought that I had left him forever, but he was wrong.”

“But what use have you been?” sneered Bellatrix. “What useful information have we had from you?”

“My information has been conveyed directly to the Dark Lord,” said Snape. “If he chooses not to share it with you —”

“He shares everything with me!” said Bellatrix, firing up at once. “He calls me his most loyal, his most faithful —”

“Does he?” said Snape, his voice delicately inflected to suggest his disbelief. “Does he *still*, after the fiasco at the Ministry?”

“That was not my fault!” said Bellatrix, flushing. “The Dark Lord has, in the past, entrusted me with his most precious — if Lucius hadn’t —”

“Don’t you dare — don’t you *dare* blame my husband!” said Narcissa, in a low and deadly voice, looking up at her sister.

“There is no point apportioning blame,” said Snape smoothly. “What is done, is done.”

“But not by you!” said Bellatrix furiously. “No, you were once again absent while the rest of us ran dangers, were you not, Snape?”

“My orders were to remain behind,” said Snape. “Perhaps you disagree with the Dark Lord, perhaps you think that Dumbledore would not have noticed if I had joined forces with the Death Eaters to fight the Order of the Phoenix? And — forgive me — you speak of dangers . . . you were facing six teenagers, were you not?”

“They were joined, as you very well know, by half of the Order before long!” snarled Bellatrix. “And, while we are on the subject of the Order, you still claim you cannot reveal the whereabouts of their headquarters, don’t you?”

“I am not the Secret-Keeper; I cannot speak the name of the place. You understand how the enchantment works, I think? The Dark Lord is satisfied with the information I have passed him on the Order. It led, as perhaps you have guessed, to the recent capture and murder of Emmeline Vance, and it certainly helped dispose of Sirius Black, though I give you full credit for finishing him off.”

He inclined his head and toasted her. Her expression did not soften.

“You are avoiding my last question, Snape. Harry Potter. You could have killed him at any point in the past five years. You have not done it. Why?”

“Have you discussed this matter with the Dark Lord?” asked Snape.

“He . . . lately, we . . . I am asking you, Snape!”

“If I had murdered Harry Potter, the Dark Lord could not have used his blood to regenerate, making him invincible —”

“You claim you foresaw his use of the boy!” she jeered.

“I do not claim it; I had no idea of his plans; I have already confessed that I thought the Dark Lord dead. I am merely trying to explain why the Dark Lord is not sorry that Potter survived, at least until a year ago. . . .”

“But why did you keep him alive?”

“Have you not understood me? It was only Dumbledore’s protection that was keeping me out of Azkaban! Do you disagree that murdering his favorite student might have turned him against me? But there was more to it than that. I should remind you that when Potter first arrived at Hogwarts there were still many stories circulating about him, rumors that he himself was a great Dark wizard, which was how he had survived the Dark Lord’s attack. Indeed, many of the Dark Lord’s old followers thought Potter might be a standard around which we could all rally once more. I was curious, I admit it, and not at all inclined to murder him the moment he set foot in the castle.

“Of course, it became apparent to me very quickly that he had no extraordinary talent at all. He has fought his way out of a number of tight corners by a simple combination of sheer luck and more talented friends. He is mediocre to the last degree, though as obnoxious and self-satisfied as was his father before him. I have done my utmost to have him thrown out of Hogwarts, where I believe he scarcely belongs, but kill him, or allow him to be killed in front of me? I would have been a fool to risk it with Dumbledore close at hand.”

“And through all this we are supposed to believe Dumbledore has

never suspected you?” asked Bellatrix. “He has no idea of your true allegiance, he trusts you implicitly still?”

“I have played my part well,” said Snape. “And you overlook Dumbledore’s greatest weakness: He has to believe the best of people. I spun him a tale of deepest remorse when I joined his staff, fresh from my Death Eater days, and he embraced me with open arms — though, as I say, never allowing me nearer the Dark Arts than he could help. Dumbledore has been a great wizard — oh yes, he has,” (for Bellatrix had made a scathing noise), “the Dark Lord acknowledges it. I am pleased to say, however, that Dumbledore is growing old. The duel with the Dark Lord last month shook him. He has since sustained a serious injury because his reactions are slower than they once were. But through all these years, he has never stopped trusting Severus Snape, and therein lies my great value to the Dark Lord.”

Bellatrix still looked unhappy, though she appeared unsure how best to attack Snape next. Taking advantage of her silence, Snape turned to her sister.

“Now . . . you came to ask me for help, Narcissa?”

Narcissa looked up at him, her face eloquent with despair.

“Yes, Severus. I — I think you are the only one who can help me, I have nowhere else to turn. Lucius is in jail and . . .”

She closed her eyes and two large tears seeped from beneath her eyelids.

“The Dark Lord has forbidden me to speak of it,” Narcissa continued, her eyes still closed. “He wishes none to know of the plan. It is . . . very secret. But —”

“If he has forbidden it, you ought not to speak,” said Snape at once. “The Dark Lord’s word is law.”

Narcissa gasped as though he had doused her with cold water. Bellatrix looked satisfied for the first time since she had entered the house.

“There!” she said triumphantly to her sister. “Even Snape says so: You were told not to talk, so hold your silence!”

But Snape had gotten to his feet and strode to the small window, peered through the curtains at the deserted street, then closed them again with a jerk. He turned around to face Narcissa, frowning.

“It so happens that I know of the plan,” he said in a low voice. “I am one of the few the Dark Lord has told. Nevertheless, had I not been in on the secret, Narcissa, you would have been guilty of great treachery to the Dark Lord.”

“I thought you must know about it!” said Narcissa, breathing more freely. “He trusts you so, Severus. . . .”

“You know about the plan?” said Bellatrix, her fleeting expression of satisfaction replaced by a look of outrage. “*You* know?”

“Certainly,” said Snape. “But what help do you require, Narcissa? If you are imagining I can persuade the Dark Lord to change his mind, I am afraid there is no hope, none at all.”

“Severus,” she whispered, tears sliding down her pale cheeks. “My son . . . my only son . . .”

“Draco should be proud,” said Bellatrix indifferently. “The Dark Lord is granting him a great honor. And I will say this for Draco: He isn’t shrinking away from his duty, he seems glad of a chance to prove himself, excited at the prospect —”

Narcissa began to cry in earnest, gazing beseechingly all the while at Snape.

“That’s because he is sixteen and has no idea what lies in store! Why, Severus? Why my son? It is too dangerous! This is vengeance for Lucius’s mistake, I know it!”

Snape said nothing. He looked away from the sight of her tears as though they were indecent, but he could not pretend not to hear her.

“That’s why he’s chosen Draco, isn’t it?” she persisted. “To punish Lucius?”

“If Draco succeeds,” said Snape, still looking away from her, “he will be honored above all others.”

“But he won’t succeed!” sobbed Narcissa. “How can he, when the Dark Lord himself — ?”

Bellatrix gasped; Narcissa seemed to lose her nerve.

“I only meant . . . that nobody has yet succeeded. . . . Severus . . . please . . . You are, you have always been, Draco’s favorite teacher. . . . You are Lucius’s old friend. . . . I beg you. . . . You are the Dark Lord’s favorite, his most trusted advisor. . . . Will you speak to him, persuade him — ?”

“The Dark Lord will not be persuaded, and I am not stupid enough to attempt it,” said Snape flatly. “I cannot pretend that the Dark Lord is not angry with Lucius. Lucius was supposed to be in charge. He got himself captured, along with how many others, and failed to retrieve the prophecy into the bargain. Yes, the Dark Lord is angry, Narcissa, very angry indeed.”

“Then I am right, he has chosen Draco in revenge!” choked Narcissa. “He does not mean him to succeed, he wants him to be

killed trying!”

When Snape said nothing, Narcissa seemed to lose what little self-restraint she still possessed. Standing up, she staggered to Snape and seized the front of his robes. Her face close to his, her tears falling onto his chest, she gasped, “You could do it. *You* could do it instead of Draco, Severus. You would succeed, of course you would, and he would reward you beyond all of us —”

Snape caught hold of her wrists and removed her clutching hands. Looking down into her tearstained face, he said slowly, “He intends me to do it in the end, I think. But he is determined that Draco should try first. You see, in the unlikely event that Draco succeeds, I shall be able to remain at Hogwarts a little longer, fulfilling my useful role as spy.”

“In other words, it doesn’t matter to him if Draco is killed!”

“The Dark Lord is very angry,” repeated Snape quietly. “He failed to hear the prophecy. You know as well as I do, Narcissa, that he does not forgive easily.”

She crumpled, falling at his feet, sobbing and moaning on the floor.

“My only son . . . my only son . . .”

“You should be proud!” said Bellatrix ruthlessly. “If I had sons, I would be glad to give them up to the service of the Dark Lord!”

Narcissa gave a little scream of despair and clutched at her long blonde hair. Snape stooped, seized her by the arms, lifted her up, and steered her back onto the sofa. He then poured her more wine and forced the glass into her hand.

“Narcissa, that’s enough. Drink this. Listen to me.”

She quieted a little; slopping wine down herself, she took a shaky

sip.

“It might be possible . . . for me to help Draco.”

She sat up, her face paper-white, her eyes huge.

“Severus — oh, Severus — you would help him? Would you look after him, see he comes to no harm?”

“I can try.”

She flung away her glass; it skidded across the table as she slid off the sofa into a kneeling position at Snape’s feet, seized his hand in both of hers, and pressed her lips to it.

“If you are there to protect him . . . Severus, will you swear it? Will you make the Unbreakable Vow?”

“The Unbreakable Vow?”

Snape’s expression was blank, unreadable. Bellatrix, however, let out a cackle of triumphant laughter.

“Aren’t you listening, Narcissa? Oh, he’ll *try*, I’m sure. . . . The usual empty words, the usual slithering out of action . . . oh, on the Dark Lord’s orders, of course!”

Snape did not look at Bellatrix. His black eyes were fixed upon Narcissa’s tear-filled blue ones as she continued to clutch his hand.

“Certainly, Narcissa, I shall make the Unbreakable Vow,” he said quietly. “Perhaps your sister will consent to be our Bonder.”

Bellatrix’s mouth fell open. Snape lowered himself so that he was kneeling opposite Narcissa. Beneath Bellatrix’s astonished gaze, they grasped right hands.

“You will need your wand, Bellatrix,” said Snape coldly.

She drew it, still looking astonished.

“And you will need to move a little closer,” he said.

She stepped forward so that she stood over them, and placed the tip of her wand on their linked hands.

Narcissa spoke.

“Will you, Severus, watch over my son, Draco, as he attempts to fulfill the Dark Lord’s wishes?”

“I will,” said Snape.

A thin tongue of brilliant flame issued from the wand and wound its way around their hands like a red-hot wire.

“And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?”

“I will,” said Snape.

A second tongue of flame shot from the wand and interlinked with the first, making a fine, glowing chain.

“And, should it prove necessary . . . if it seems Draco will fail . . .” whispered Narcissa (Snape’s hand twitched within hers, but he did not draw away), “will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?”

There was a moment’s silence. Bellatrix watched, her wand upon their clasped hands, her eyes wide.

“I will,” said Snape.

Bellatrix’s astounded face glowed red in the blaze of a third tongue of flame, which shot from the wand, twisted with the others, and bound itself thickly around their clasped hands, like a rope, like a fiery snake.

Spinnerstraat

Baie myle verder dryf die ysige mis wat teen die Eerste Minister se vensters vasgewaai het oor 'n vuil rivier wat tussen toegegroeide walle vol rommel deur kronkel. Op die agtergrond troon 'n yslike skoorsteen, die oorblyfsel van 'n meul wat nie meer gebruik word nie, dreigend en onheilspellend uit. Die enigste geluide hier is die gefluister van die swart water en die enigste tekens van lewe 'n maer jakkals wat by die rivierwal af sluip in die hoop om ou vis-en-skyfiespapier in die lang gras uit te snuffel.

Skielik is daar 'n dowwe plofgeluid en 'n skraal figuur met 'n kap op verskyn uit die niet op die rivierwal. Die jakkals staan doodstil, sy behoedsame oë vasgenael op hierdie vreemde nuwe fenomeen. Die figuur oriënteer haarself vir 'n paar oomblikke en loop dan met ligte, vinnige treë weg sodat haar lang mantel in die gras ritsel.

Daar is 'n tweede, harder plofgeluid en nog 'n figuur met 'n kap op materialiseer.

“Wag!”

Die skril gil laat die jakkals, wat nou al amper plat in die ruigte lê, só skrik dat hy uit sy wegkruipplek opspring en teen die rivierwal uithardloop. Daar flits 'n groen ligstraal, daar is 'n tjankgeluid, en die jakkals val dood op die grond neer.

Die tweede figuur draai die dier met haar toon om.

“Net 'n jakkals,” sê 'n vrou se stem minagtend van onder haar kap uit. “Ek dog dis dalk 'n Auror – Cissy, wag!”

Maar Narcissa, wat gaan staan en gesien het wat die ligstraal gedoen het, skarrel nou teen die rivierwal uit waar die jakkals so pas afgeval het.

“Cissy – Narcissa – luister na my –”

Die tweede vrou haal die eerste een in en gryp haar aan die arm, maar sy ruk los.

“Gaan terug, Bella!”

“Luister na my!”

“Ek het klaar geluister. Ek het klaar besluit. Los my nou uit!”

Die vrou genaamd Narcissa kom bo teen die wal uit waar 'n ou paalheining die rivier van 'n nou keisteenstraatjie skei. Die ander vrou, Bella, is binne oomblikke by haar. Sy aan sy staan hulle en bekyk die straat met sy rye en rye vervalde baksteenhuise waarvan die vensters doods en blind in die donker is.

"Bly hy hier?" vra Bella in 'n stem vol minagting. "*Hier?* In hierdie Moggel-mishoop? Ons moet die eerste van ons soort wees wat ons voete sit in –"

Maar Narcissa luister nie. Sy glip deur 'n opening in die heining en loop haastig met die straat af.

"Cissy, wag!"

Bella volg met haar kleed wat agter haar aan fladder en sien hoe Narcissa vinnig met 'n stegie tussen die huise langs na 'n tweede, amper identiese straat toe loop. Party van die straatlampe is gebreek; die twee vrouens hardloop tussen kolle lig en diep donkerte. Die agtervolger haal haar prooi in net voor sy om nóg 'n hoek verdwyn. Hierdie keer kry sy haar stewig aan die arm beet en swaai haar om sodat hulle mekaar in die oë kyk.

"Cissy, moenie dit doen nie. Jy kan hom nie vertrou nie –"

"Die Donker Heer vertrou hom, dan nie?"

"Die Donker Heer is ... wat my betref ... verkeerd," hyg Bella en haar oë gloei vir 'n oomblik onder haar kap soos sy omkyk om seker te maak hulle is alleen. "In elk geval, ons is aangesê om met niemand oor die plan te praat nie. Dit is verraad teen die Donker Heer!"

"Los my, Bella!" grom Narcissa. Sy pluk 'n towerstaf onder haar mantel uit en hou dit dreigend voor die ander vrou se gesig. Bella lag haar uit.

"Cissy, jou eie suster? Jy sal nie –"

"Daar is niks wat ek nie meer sal doen nie!" hyg Narcissa en daar is 'n tikkie histerie in haar stem. Sy kap met haar towerstaf soos met 'n mes en daar flits nog 'n ligstraal. Dit is asof iets Bella brand en sy los dadelik haar suster se arm.

"Narcissa!"

Maar Narcissa haas haar reeds verder. Haar agtervolger vryf haar hand en bly nou op 'n veilige afstand terwyl hulle dieper by die verlate doolhof van baksteenhuise inbeweeg. Uiteindelik loop Narcissa vinnig op in 'n doodloopstraatjie genaamd Spinnerstraat. Die meul se skoorsteen toring soos 'n reuse waarskuwende vinger bo die straat uit. Haar voetstappe eggo op die keistene terwyl sy verby die toege-spykerde en gebreekte vensters loop tot by die heel laaste huis waar 'n dowwe lig deur die gordyne in 'n onderste vertrek skyn.

Sy klop aan die deur voor Bella, wat onderlangs swets, haar

inhaal. Hulle staan saam en wag, effens uitasem, terwyl die nagbriesie die reuk van die vuil rivier na hulle toe aandra. Ná 'n paar sekondes hoor hulle 'n beweging agter die deur en gaan dit krakend oop. 'n Seningrige man staar hulle aan, 'n man met lang swart hare wat soos oopgetrekte gordyne aan weerskante van 'n sieklike geel gesig en swart oë hang.

Narcissa haal haar kap af. Sy is so bleek dat dit lyk of sy in die donker skyn; die lang blonde hare wat by haar rug afhang, laat haar lyk soos iemand wat verdrink het.

"Narcissa!" sê die man en maak die deur effens wyer oop sodat die lig op haar en haar suster val. "Wat 'n aangename verrassing!"

"Severus," sê sy in 'n skor fluisterstem. "Mag ek met jou praat? Dis dringend."

"Maar natuurlik."

Hy tree terug sodat sy by die huis kan inkom. Haar suster volg sonder dat sy genooi word, met haar kap nog oor haar kop.

"Snape," sê sy stug toe sy verby hom beweeg.

"Bellatrix," antwoord hy en sy lippe krul smalend terwyl hy die deur agter hulle toeklap.

Hulle staan in 'n klein sitkamer wat voel of dit 'n donker, gekus-singde sel is. Die mure is heeltemal toe onder boeke, die meeste met ou swart of bruin leeromslae; verder staan daar 'n verslete rusbank, 'n ou leunstoel en 'n lendelam tafel saam gegroepeer in 'n poel dowwe lig afkomstig van 'n kerslamp wat van die plafon af hang. Die plek lyk verwaarloos, asof dit nie gewoonlik bewoon word nie.

Snape beduie vir Narcissa na die rusbank. Sy trek haar mantel haastig uit, gooi dit eenkant neer, gaan sit en staar na haar bewende wit hande wat sy in haar skoot vasklem. Bellatrix haal haar kap stadig af. Sy is so donker soos wat haar suster blond is, met swaar ooglede en 'n sterk kakebeen, en sy kyk stip na Snape terwyl sy agter Narcissa gaan staan.

"So wat kan ek vir julle doen?" vra Snape terwyl hy hom in die leunstoel oorkant die twee susters tuismaak.

"Ons ... ons is alleen, nie waar nie?" vra Narcissa saggies.

"Ja, natuurlik. Wel, Wurmstert is hier, maar ons tel nie gespuis nie, of hoe?"

Hy mik met sy towerstaf na die muur boeke agter hom. 'n Versteekte deur vlieg met 'n knal oop en onthul 'n smal trap waarop 'n klein mannetjie vasgenael staan.

"Soos wat jy duidelik agtergekom het, Wurmstert, het ons gaste," sê Snape lui.

Die mannetjie skuifel met 'n kromgetrekte rug by die laaste paar

trappies af en kom by die vertrek in. Hy het klein, waterige ogies, 'n gepunte neus en 'n vals, aangeplakte glimlaggie. Sy linkerhand steel oor sy regterhand wat lyk of dit in 'n helder silwer handskoen gewikkel is.

"Narcissa!" sê hy in 'n piepstemmetjie. "En Bellatrix!" Hoe sjarmant –"

"Wurmstert sal vir ons drankies kry, as julle wil hê," sê Snape. "En daarna sal hy terug na sy slaapkamer toe gaan."

Wurmstert krimp ineen asof Snape hom met iets gegooi het.

"Ek is nie jou bediende nie!" piep hy en vermy Snape se oë.

"Nie? Ek was onder die indruk dat die Donker Heer jou hier geplaas het om my by te staan."

"By te staan, ja – maar nie om vir jou drankies te skink en – jou huis skoon te maak nie!"

"Ek het nie besef jy wat Wurmstert is, smag na gevaarliker opdragte nie," sê Snape sag. "Dit kan maklik gereël word: Ek sal met die Donker Heer praat –"

"Ek kan self met hom praat as ek wil!"

"Natuurlik kan jy," sê Snape smalend. "Maar intussen – bring vir ons drankies. Van daardie wyn wat die elwe gemaak het."

Wurmstert huiwer vir 'n oomblik. Dit lyk of hy wil argumenteer, maar dan draai hy om en loop deur 'n tweede versteekte deur. Hulle hoor kasdeure oop- en toeklap en die gerinkel van glase. Binne sekondes is hy terug met 'n stowwerige bottel en drie glase op 'n skinkbord. Hy plak dit op die lendelam tafel neer, skuifel haastig van hulle af weg en klap die boekedeur agter hom toe.

Snape skink drie glase van die bloedrooi wyn en gee twee daarvan vir die susters. Narcissa mompel iets van dankie, maar Bellatrix sê niks nie en bly Snape net aangluur. Dit bring hom blykbaar nie van stryk nie; intendeel, hy lyk nogal geamuseerd.

"Op die Donker Heer," sê hy en lig sy glas en drink dit met een sluk leeg.

Die susters volg sy voorbeeld. Snape skink hul glase weer vol.

Narcissa neem haar tweede drankie en sê vinnig: "Severus, ek is jammer om jou hier te kom pla, maar ek moes jou sien. Ek dink jy is die enigste een wat my kan help –"

Snape lig sy hand om haar stil te maak en mik weer met sy towerstaf na die versteekte trapdeur. Daar is 'n harde slag en 'n gil, gevolg deur die geluid van Wurmstert wat met die trappies op weg-skarrel.

"My apologie," sê Snape. "Hy luister deesdae so by deure af. Ek weet nie wat dit is met hom nie ... Hoe't jy nou weer gesê, Narcissa?"

Sy snak sidderend na asem en begin weer.

“Severus, ek weet ek behoort nie hierheen te kom nie. Ek is aangese om niks vir iemand te sê nie, maar –”

“Nou hou dan jou mond!” snou Bellatrix haar toe. “Veral in sy teenwoordigheid!”

“In my teenwoordigheid?” vra Snape grynsend. “En wat moet ek daaruit aflei, Bellatrix?”

“Dat ek jou nie vertrou nie, Snape, en jy weet dit baie goed!”

Narcissa maak 'n geluid wat soos 'n droë snik klink en druk haar gesig in haar hande. Snape sit sy glas op die tafel neer en leun dan terug met sy hande op die stoel se armleunings. Hy glimlag vir Bellatrix se nors gesig.

“Narcissa, ek dink ons moet hoor wat Bellatrix so bars om vir ons te sê; dit sal vervelige onderbrekings voorkom. Nou toe, gaan voort, Bellatrix,” sê Snape. “Hoekom vertrou jy my nie?”

“Daar is 'n honderd redes!” sê sy hard terwyl sy agter die rusbank uit beweeg en haar glas op die tafel neerplak. “Waar moet ek begin? Waar was jy toe die Donker Heer tot 'n val gekom het? Hoekom het jy nooit enige poging aangewend om hom op te spoor toe hy verdwyn het nie? Wat het jy gedoen, al die jare dat jy so 'n lekker lewe saam met Dumbledore gehad het? Hoekom het jy gekeer dat die Donker Heer die Towenaar se Steen in die hande kry? Hoekom het jy nie dadelik teruggekeer toe die Donker Heer weer met nuwe krag vervul is nie? Waar was jy 'n paar weke gelede toe ons moes veg om die profesie vir die Donker Heer terug te kry? En hoekom, Snape, lewe Harry Potter nog nadat hy vyf jaar lank aan jou genade uitgelewer was?”

Sy bly skielik stil. Haar borskas beweeg hygend op en af en haar wange is donkerrooi. Agter haar sit Narcissa bewegingloos met haar gesig nog steeds in haar hande.

Snape glimlag.

“Voor ek jou antwoord – o ja, Bellatrix, ek gaan jou antwoord! Jy kan dit wat ek hier sê, gaan oorvertel aan al die ander wat so agter my rug fluister en allerhande liegstories oor my verraad by die Donker Heer aandra. Voor ek jou antwoord, wil ek eers op my beurt vir jou 'n vraag vra. Dink jy werklik die Donker Heer het my nie 'n ieder en 'n elk van daardie vrae gevra nie? En dink jy werklik dat ek nog hier met julle sou gesit en gesels het as ek nie vir hom bevredigende antwoorde kon gegee het nie?”

Sy huiwer.

“Ek weet hy glo jou, maar –”

“Jy dink hy maak 'n fout? Of dat ek hom op die een of ander

manier uitoorlê het? Hoe flous enigiemand die Donker Heer, die grootste towenaar ooit, die mees begaafde Legilimens wat die wêreld nog ooit aanskou het?”

Bellatrix sê niks nie, maar sy lyk vir die eerste keer onseker van haarself. Snape dring nie aan nie. Hy tel sy drankie weer op, neem 'n slukkie en gaan dan weer voort: “Jy vra hoekom ek nie daar was toe die Donker Heer tot 'n val gekom het nie. Ek was waar hy my beveel het om te wees, by die Hogwarts Skool vir Heksery en Towerkuns, want hy wou hê ek moes op Albus Dumbledore spioeneer. Ek veronderstel jy weet dit was op bevel van die Donker Heer dat ek daardie pos aanvaar het?”

Sy knik amper onmerkbaar en maak haar mond oop, maar Snape spring haar voor.

“Jy vra hoekom ek hom nie probeer opspoor het toe hy verdwyn het nie. Om dieselfde rede dat Avery, Yaxley, die Carrows, Greyback, Lucius,” hy draai sy kop effens na Narcissa toe, “en baie ander hom nie probeer opspoor het nie. Ek het gedink hy is verslaan. Ek is nie trots daarop nie; ek was verkeerd, maar daar het jy dit nou ... As hy ons wat in daardie stadium ons geloof in hom verloor het nie vergewe het nie, sou hy vandag bitter min volgelinge oorgehad het.”

“Hy sou vir my gehad het!” sê Bellatrix vurig. “Vir my wat baie jare in Azkaban deurgebring het – vir hom!”

“Ja, inderdaad, baie prysenswaardig,” sê Snape in 'n verveelde stem. “Jy was natuurlik nie van veel nut vir hom daar in die tronk nie, maar die gebaar was ongetwyfeld eerbaar –”

“Gebaar!” gil sy en in haar woede lyk sy effens mal. “Terwyl ek die Dementors moes verduur, het jy in Hogwarts 'n luilekker bestaan gevoer as Dumbledore se witbroodjie!”

“Nie heeltemal nie,” sê Snape kalm. “Hy wou nie vir my die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-pos gee nie, weet jy. Hy het blykbaar gedink dit sal té 'n groot versoeking wees en ek sal dalk e ... weer in my ou gewoontes verval.”

“Was dit wat jy vir die Donker Heer opgeoffer het? Om nie jou gunstelingvak te onderrig nie?” vra sy spottend. “Hoekom het jy so lank daar aangebly, Snape? Om op Dumbledore te spioeneer vir 'n meester wat jy gedink het dood is?”

“Beswaarlik,” sê Snape, “alhoewel die Donker Heer bly is ek het my pos nie versaaak nie. Ek kon met sy terugkeer vir hom sestien jaar se inligting oor Dumbledore gee, en dit is 'n effens nuttiger verwelkomingsgeskenk as 'n eindelose ophaal van herinneringe oor hoe onaangenaam Azkaban was ...”

“Maar jy het aangebly –”

“Ja, Bellatrix, ek het aangebly,” sê Snape en verraai vir die eerste keer ’n sweempie ongeduld. “Ek het ’n gerieflike werk gehad wat ek bo ’n uitgerekte verblyf in Azkaban verkies het. Hulle het die Doodseters aangekeer, onthou. Dumbledore se beskerming het my uit die tronk gehou; dit was gerieflik en ek het dit uitgebuit. Ek herhaal: Die Donker Heer kla nie omdat ek aangebly het nie, dus ek verstaan nie hoekom jy dit doen nie.

“Ek dink wat jy volgende wou weet,” gaan hy aan en verhef sy stem effens, want dit lyk of Bellatrix hom met alle mag weer wil onderbreek, “is hoekom ek tussen die Donker Heer en die Towenaar se Steen gestaan het. Dis maklik om te antwoord. Hy het nie geweet of hy my kon vertrou nie. Hy het nes jy gedink ek het van ’n getroue Doodseter in Dumbledore se handlangers verander. Hy was in ’n jammerlike toestand, baie swak, en moes ’n ordinêre towenaar se liggaam deel. Hy kon dit nie waag om homself aan ’n voormalige bondgenoot te openbaar as daardie bondgenoot hom dalk aan Dumbledore of die Ministerie kon uitlewer nie. Ek is baie jammer dat hy my nie vertrou het nie. Hy sou drie jaar vroeër al sy mag kon herwin het, maar helaas het ek net gesien hoe die gierige en onwaardige Quirrel die Steen probeer steel en, ek moet erken, ek het alles moontlik gedoen om hom te dwarsboom.”

Bellatrix se mond vertrek asof sy so pas ’n yslike dosis slegte medisyne gedrink het.

“Maar jy het nie teruggekom toe hy teruggekeer het nie. Jy het nie dadelik by hom aangesluit toe jy die Donker Merk voel brand het nie –”

“Korrek. Ek het twee uur later teruggekom. Ek het op Dumbledore se bevel teruggekom.”

“Op Dumbledore se – ?” begin sy snakkend van woede.

“Dink!” sê Snape skerp, duidelik weer ongeduldig. “Dink! Deur twee uur te wag, net twee uur, het ek seker gemaak dat ek as ’n spioen by Hogwarts kan aanbly! Deur Dumbledore te laat dink dat ek my weer by die Donker Heer skaar bloot omdat hy my beveel het om dit te doen, kon ek sedertdien inligting oor Dumbledore en die Orde van die Feniks deurgee! Onthou, Bellatrix: die Donker Merk het al maande lank sterker geword; ek het geweet hy gaan binnekort terugkeer, al die Doodseters het dit geweet! Ek het oorgenoeg tyd gehad om te dink wat om te doen, om my volgende stap te beplan, om soos Karkaroff te ontsnap, nie waar nie?”

“Ek verseker jou, die Donker Heer se aanvanklike misnoeë omdat ek laat was, het vinnig verdwyn toe ek verduidelik dat ek altyd getrou gebly het, al hét Dumbledore gedink ek behoort nou aan

hom. Ja, die Donker Heer het gedink ek het hom vir ewig versaak, **maar** hy was verkeerd.”

“Maar van watter nut was jy?” smaal Bellatrix. “Watter nuttige **inligting** het ons by jou gekry?”

“My inligting is direk aan die Donker Heer oorgedra,” sê Snape. “**As** hy verkies om dit nie met jou te deel nie –”

“Hy deel alles met my!” sis Bellatrix, dadelik weer vurig. “Hy **noem** my sy lojaalste en getrouste –”

“Is dit so?” vra Snape met ’n subtiële toon van ongeloof in sy **stem**. “Is dit *nog steeds* so ná die fiasko by die Ministerie?”

“Dit was nie my skuld nie!” sê Bellatrix rooi in die gesig. “Die Donker Heer het my in die verlede met sy allerkosbaarste vertrou – **as** Lucius nie –”

“Hoe durf jy – hoe *durf* jy my man blameer!” sê Narcissa in ’n **lae**, doodse stem en kyk op na haar suster.

“Dit is nutteloos om nou skuld te wil uitdeel,” sê Snape saaklik. “Gedane sake het geen keer nie.”

“Maar jy was nie eens daar nie!” val Bellatrix weer woedend aan. “Nee, jy was weer eens nie daar toe die res van ons soveel gevare moes trotseer nie, Snape!”

“Ek is beveel om agter te bly,” sê Snape. “Miskien stem jy nie saam met die Donker Heer nie, miskien dink jy Dumbledore sou nie agtergekom het as ek met die Doodseters saamgespan het om die Orde van die Feniks te beveg nie? En – vergewe my – jy praat van gevare ... julle het teen ses tieners te staan gekom, nie waar nie?”

“Dit was nie lank nie of die helfte van die Orde het by hulle aangesluit, en jy weet dit baie goed!” grom Bellatrix. “En terwyl ons nou van die Orde praat, hou jy nog steeds vol dat jy nie kan bekend maak waar hul Hoofkwartier is nie?”

“Ek is nie die Geheime Bewaarder nie; ek mag nie die plek se naam uiter nie. Jy verstaan tog hoe die betowering werk, dan nie? Die Donker Heer is tevrede met die inligting wat ek hom oor die Orde gegee het. Soos jy moontlik afgelei het, het dit gelei tot die onlangse gevangeneming en dood van Emmeline Vance, en dit het beslis gehelp om van Sirius Black ontslae te raak, hoewel ek jou volle krediet gee vir die feit dat jy met hom klaargespeel het.”

Hy draai sy kop skuins en lig sy glas, maar haar uitdrukking versag nie.

“Jy vermy my laaste vraag, Snape: Harry Potter. Jy kon hom hoeveel keer gedurende die afgelope vyf jaar doodgemaak het. Maar jy het nie. Hoekom nie?”

“Het jy hierdie aangeleentheid met die Donker Heer bespreek?” vra Snape.

“Hy ... in die laaste tyd het ons ... Ek vra vir jou, Snapel!”

“As ek Harry Potter doodgemaak het, sou die Donker Heer nie sy bloed kon gebruik het om hom met nuwe lewe te vervul, om hom onoorwinbaar te maak nie.”

“Gee jy nou voor jy het voorsien hoe hy die seun gaan gebruik?” vra sy honend.

“Nee, ek gee niks van die aard voor nie. Ek het geen idee gehad wat sy planne is nie. Ek het reeds erken dat ek gedink het die Donker Heer is dood. Ek probeer net verduidelik hoekom die Donker Heer nie spyt is Potter het oorleef nie, ten minste nie tot ’n jaar gelede nie ...”

“Maar hoekom het jy hom laat lewe?”

“Verstaan jy dan niks nie? Dit was slegs danksy Dumbledore se beskerming dat ek nie Azkaban toe gestuur is nie! As ek sy gunstelingstudent vermoor het, sou hy dadelik teen my gedraai het. Maar daar was meer as dit. Dink bietjie terug: Toe Potter die eerste keer by Hogwarts aangekom het, was daar nog steeds baie stories oor hom, gerugte dat hy self ’n groot Donker towenaar is en daarom die Donker Heer se aanval kon oorleef. Baie van die Donker Heer se volgelingen het gedink Potter is dalk die een wat ons almal weer sou herenig. Ek erken, ek was nuuskierig en het dit glad nie oorweeg om hom uit die weg te ruim die oomblik dat hy by die kasteel ingestap het nie.

“Dit het natuurlik baie gou vir my duidelik geword dat hy oorhoegenaamd geen buitengewone talente beskik nie. Hy het hom al uit ’n aantal netelige situasies gewurm danksy ’n kombinasie van blote geluk en meer begaafde vriende. Hy is doodgewoon en doodgemiddeld, hoewel hy net so onuitstaanbaar en verwaand is soos wat sy pa was. Ek het my uiterste bes gedoen om hom by Hogwarts uitgegooi te kry, want ek dink hy hoort beswaarlik daar, maar hom doodmaak of toelaat dat hy voor my doodgemaak word? Ek sou ’n dwaas wees om so ’n kans te waag met Dumbledore in die omtrek.”

“En ná dit alles verwag jy ons moet glo dat Dumbledore jou nooit verdink het nie?” vra Bellatrix. “Dat hy geen benul het van waar jou eintlike lojaliteit lê nie? Dat hy jou volkome vertrou?”

“Ek het my rol goed vertolk,” sê Snape. “En julle vergeet van Dumbledore se grootste swakheid: Hy glo altyd net die beste van mense. Ek het vir hom ’n storie van diepe berou vertel toe ek by sy personeel aangesluit het, net ná my dae as Doodseter, en hy het my met ope arms ontvang – alhoewel hy, soos ek sê, my altyd sover

moontlik van die Donker Kunste af weggehou het. Dumbledore was 'n groot towenaar – o ja, hy was,” (want Bellatrix snork verontwaardig) “die Donker Heer sê self so. Ek is egter bly om te kan sê dat Dumbledore nou oud word. Verlede maand se tweegeveg met die Donker Heer het hom geruk. Hy is ernstig beseer, want sy reaksies is baie stadiger as eers. Maar deur die jare het hy Severus Snape altyd vertrou, en dit is hoekom ek vir die Donker Heer so waardevol is.”

Bellatrix is nog steeds ongelukkig, al lyk sy onseker oor hoe om Snape volgende aan te val. Snape benut haar stilte en draai na haar suster toe.

“So ... jy kom vra my hulp, Narcissa?”

Narcissa kyk op na hom en haar gesig spreek van wanhoop.

“Ja, Severus. Ek – ek dink jy is die enigste een wat my kan help. Ek kan my tot niemand anders wend nie. Lucius is in die tronk en ...”

Sy maak haar oë toe en twee groot tranes sypel onder haar ooglede uit.

“Die Donker Heer het my verbied om daaroor te praat,” gaan Narcissa aan met haar oë nog steeds toe. “Hy wil hê niemand moet van die plan weet nie. Dit is ... hoogs geheim. Maar –”

“As hy dit verbied het, mag jy nie daaroor praat nie,” sê Snape dadelik. “Die Donker Heer se woord is wet.”

Narcissa snak asof iemand koue water oor haar uitgegooi het. Bellatrix lyk vir die eerste keer van sy by die huis ingekom het tevrede.

“Sien jy nou!” sê sy triomfantelik vir haar suster. “Selfs Snape sê so: Jy is verbied om iets te sê, so hou jou mond!”

Maar Snape het intussen op sy voete gekom en na die venster geloop om by die gordyne oor die verlate straat uit te kyk. Hy pluk die gordyne vinnig toe en draai fronsend om na Narcissa.

“Ek weet toevallig van die plan,” sê hy in 'n diep stem. “Ek is een van die weiniges vir wie die Donker Heer daarvan vertel het. Nogtans, as ek nie in die geheim gedeel het nie, Narcissa, was jy nou skuldig aan hoogverraad teen die Donker Heer.”

“Ek het gedink jy sal daarvan weet!” sê Narcissa en begin meer egalig asemhaal. “Hy vertrou jou dan so, Severus ...”

“Jy weet van die plan?” vra Bellatrix en haar kortstondige uitdrukking van tevredenheid verander in verontwaardiging. “Jy weet?”

“Vir seker,” sê Snape. “Maar waarmee het jy hulp nodig, Narcissa? As jy dink ek kan die Donker Heer oorreed om van plan

te verander, is ek bevrees daar is geen hoop vir jou nie, hoegenaamd geen.”

“Severus,” fluister sy terwyl die trane oor haar bleek wange stroom. “My seun ... my enigste seun ...”

“Draco behoort trots te wees,” sê Bellatrix onverskillig. “Die Donker Heer doen hom ’n groot eer aan. En ek moet Draco een ding toegee: Hy deins nie terug van sy plig nie, hy lyk bly dat hy die kans gaan kry om homself te bewys, hy lyk opgewonde oor die vooruit-sig —”

Narcissa begin met menig huil terwyl sy smekend na Snape kyk.

“Dis omdat hy sestien is en nie ’n benul het wat vir hom wag nie! Hoekom, Severus? Hoekom my seun? Dis te gevaarlik! Dis om Lucius te straf vir die fout wat hy gemaak het, ek weet dit!”

Snape sê niks nie. Hy weier om na haar trane te kyk, asof hulle onbetaamlik is, maar hy kan nie voorgee hy hoor haar nie.

“Dit is hoekom hy Draco gekies het, nie waar nie?” hou sy vol. “Om Lucius te straf?”

“As Draco slaag,” sê Snape terwyl hy nog steeds nie vir haar kyk nie, “sal hy bo al die ander vereer word.”

“Maar hy sal nie slaag nie!” snik Narcissa. “Hoe kan hy, as die Donker Heer self nie —”

Bellatrix snak; Narcissa se moed begewe haar skielik.

“Ek het net bedoel ... Niemand het dit nog reggekry ... Severus ... asseblief ... jy is, jy was nog altyd, Draco se gunsteling-onderwyser ... jy is Lucius se ou vriend ... Ek smee jou ... jy is die Donker Heer se gunsteling; sy betroubaarste adviseur ... praat asseblief met hom en oorreed hom —”

“Die Donker Heer sal hom nie laat ompraat nie, en ek is nie onnosel genoeg om dit te probeer doen nie,” sê Snape beslis. “Ek kan nie voorgee dat die Donker Heer nie vir Lucius kwaad is nie. Lucius was veronderstel om in beheer van sake te wees, maar hy is gevang, saam met talle ander, en hy kon dit boonop nie regkry om die profesie in die hande te kry nie. Ja, die Donker Heer is kwaad, Narcissa; hy is baie kwaad.”

“Dan is ek reg. Hy het Draco gekies om wraak te neem!” snik Narcissa. “Hy wil nie hê hy moet slaag nie; hy wil hê hy moet in die proses doodgaan!”

Snape sê niks nie en dit lyk of Narcissa haar laaste bietjie selfbeheersing verloor. Sy kom regop, steier tot by Snape en gryp hom voor aan sy kleed. Haar gesig is naby aan syne, haar trane val op sy bors en sy snak: “Jy kan dit doen. Jy kan dit doen, eerder as Draco,

Severus. Jy sal dit regkry, jy sal ongetwyfeld, en hy sal jou bo ons almal beloon –”

Snape gryp haar gewrigte vas en ruk haar klouende hande los. Hy kyk af na haar betraande gesig en praat stadig: “Ek dink hy beplan dat ek dit op die ou end moet doen. Maar hy is vasberade dat Draco eerste moet probeer. Sien jy, ingeval Draco slaag, wat onwaarskynlik is, sal ek nog steeds ’n rukkie langer by Hogwarts kan aanbly en my rol as spioen vervul.”

“Met ander woorde, dit maak nie vir hom saak of Draco doodgaan nie?”

“Die Donker Heer is baie kwaad,” herhaal Snape sag. “Hy kon nie hoor wat die profesie sê nie en jy weet so goed soos ek, Narcissa – hy vergewe nie maklik nie.”

Sy krimp ineen, val op die vloer by sy voete neer en snik en weeklaag.

“My enigste seun ... my enigste seun ...”

“Jy behoort trots te wees!” sê Bellatrix onverbiddelike. “As ek seuns gehad het, sou ek maar te dankbaar gewees het om hulle in diens van die Donker Heer te stel!”

Narcissa gee ’n wanhoopsgilletjie en gryp haar lang blonde hare vas. Snape buk af, kry haar aan die arms beet, lig haar op en lei haar terug na die rusbank. Hy skink vir haar nog wyn en forseer die glas in haar hand.

“Narcissa, dis nou genoeg. Drink dit en luister na my.” Sy bedaar effens; stort van die wyn op haar uit en neem bewurig ’n sluk.

“Ek mag miskien ... vir Draco kan help.”

Sy sit regop, haar gesig papierwit, haar oë groot.

“Severus – o, Severus – sal jy hom help? Sal jy na hom kyk en seker maak hy kom niks oor nie?”

“Ek kan probeer.”

Sy gooi haar glas neer en dit gly oor die tafel terwyl sy van die rusbank af opspring en op haar knieë voor Snape se voete neersak, sy hand in albei hare vasgryp en haar lippe daarteen druk.

“As jy daar is om hom te beskerm ... Severus, sweer jy jy sal? Sal jy die Onbreekbare Eed sweer?”

“Die Onbreekbare Eed?” Snape se uitdrukking verrai niks nie, maar Bellatrix kraai triomfantelik van die lag.

“Hoor jy nie wat hy sê nie, Narcissa? O ja, hy sal probeer, ek is seker hy sal ... die gewone leë woorde, die gewone manier waarop hy hom uit alles loswikkel ... o, op bevel van die Donker Heer natuurlik!”

Snape kyk nie na Bellatrix nie. Sy swart oë bly vasgenael op

Narcissa se betraande blou kykers terwyl sy sy hand nog steeds vasklou.

“Vir seker, Narcissa, sal ek die Onbreekbare Eed sweer,” sê hy sag. “Miskien sal jou suster instem om ons Eedgetuie te wees.”

Bellatrix se mond val oop. Snape sak op die vloer neer sodat hy oorkant Narcissa kniel. Terwyl Bellatrix verstom toekyk, gryp hulle mekaar se regterhand.

“Ek gaan jou towerstaf nodig hê, Bellatrix,” sê Snape kil.

Sy haal dit uit en lyk nog steeds verstom.

“En jy sal ’n bietjie nader moet beweeg,” sê hy.

Sy gee ’n paar tree vorentoe sodat sy bo-oor hulle staan en plaas die punt van haar towerstaf op hul saamgevoude hande.

Narcissa praat eerste.

“Sal jy, Severus, waak oor my seun, Draco, terwyl hy probeer om aan die Donker Heer se wense te voldoen?”

“Ek sal,” sê Snape.

’n Dun, helder vlamtongetjie spring by die towerstaf uit en draai soos ’n rooiwarm draad om hul hande.

“En sal jy hom na die beste van jou vermoëns teen leed beskerm?”

“Ek sal,” sê Snape.

’n Tweede vuurtong skiet uit die towerstaf, vervleg met die eerste een en vorm ’n dun, gloeiende ketting.

“En as dit nodig blyk te wees ... as dit lyk of Draco gaan misluk ...” fluister Narcissa (Snape se hand ruk in hare, maar hy los nie), “sal jy die daad wat die Donker Heer Draco beveel het om te pleeg, uitvoer?”

Daar is ’n oomblik van stilte. Bellatrix hou hulle dop, haar towerstaf op hul saamgevoude hande, haar oë groot.

“Ek sal,” sê Snape.

Bellatrix se verbysterde gesig gloei rooi in die lig van ’n derde vuurtong wat uit die towerstaf skiet, met die ander twee verstrengel en hul saamgevoude hande stewig saambind soos ’n dik tou, soos ’n slang van vuur.

CHAPTER THREE



WILL AND WON'T

Harry Potter was snoring loudly. He had been sitting in a chair beside his bedroom window for the best part of four hours, staring out at the darkening street, and had finally fallen asleep with one side of his face pressed against the cold windowpane, his glasses askew and his mouth wide open. The misty fug his breath had left on the window sparkled in the orange glare of the streetlamp outside, and the artificial light drained his face of all color, so that he looked ghostly beneath his shock of untidy black hair.

The room was strewn with various possessions and a good smattering of rubbish. Owl feathers, apple cores, and sweet wrappers littered the floor, a number of spellbooks lay higgledy-piggledy among the tangled robes on his bed, and a mess of

newspapers sat in a puddle of light on his desk. The headline of one blared:

HARRY POTTER: THE CHOSEN ONE?

Rumors continue to fly about the mysterious recent disturbance at the Ministry of Magic, during which He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was sighted once more.

“We’re not allowed to talk about it, don’t ask me anything,” said one agitated Obliviator, who refused to give his name as he left the Ministry last night.

Nevertheless, highly placed sources within the Ministry have confirmed that the disturbance centered on the fabled Hall of Prophecy.

Though Ministry spokeswizards have hitherto refused even to confirm the existence of such a place, a growing number of the Wizarding community believe that the Death Eaters now serving sentences in Azkaban for trespass and attempted theft were attempting to steal a prophecy. The nature of that prophecy is unknown, although speculation is rife that it concerns Harry Potter, the only person ever known to have survived the Killing Curse, and who is also known to have been at the Ministry on the night in question. Some are going so far as to call Potter “the Chosen One,” believing that the prophecy names him as the only one who will be able to rid us of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

The current whereabouts of the prophecy, if it exists, are unknown, although (*ctd. page 2, column 5*)

A second newspaper lay beside the first. This one bore the headline:

SCRIMGEOUR SUCCEEDS FUDGE

Most of this front page was taken up with a large black-and-white picture of a man with a lionlike mane of thick hair and a rather ravaged face. The picture was moving — the man was waving at the ceiling.

Rufus Scrimgeour, previously Head of the Auror office in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has succeeded Cornelius Fudge as Minister of Magic. The appointment has largely been greeted with enthusiasm by the Wizarding community, though rumors of a rift between the new Minister and Albus Dumbledore, newly reinstated Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, surfaced within hours of Scrimgeour taking office.

Scrimgeour's representatives admitted that he had met with Dumbledore at once upon taking possession of the top job, but refused to comment on the topics under discussion. Albus Dumbledore is known to (*ctd. page 3, column 2*)

To the left of this paper sat another, which had been folded so that a story bearing the title MINISTRY GUARANTEES STUDENTS' SAFETY was visible.

Newly appointed Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, spoke today of the tough new measures taken by his Ministry to ensure the safety of students returning to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft

and Wizardry this autumn.

“For obvious reasons, the Ministry will not be going into detail about its stringent new security plans,” said the Minister, although an insider confirmed that measures include defensive spells and charms, a complex array of countercurses, and a small task force of Aurors dedicated solely to the protection of Hogwarts School.

Most seem reassured by the new Minister’s tough stand on student safety. Said Mrs. Augusta Longbottom, “My grandson, Neville — a good friend of Harry Potter’s, incidentally, who fought the Death Eaters alongside him at the Ministry in June and —”

But the rest of this story was obscured by the large birdcage standing on top of it. Inside it was a magnificent snowy owl. Her amber eyes surveyed the room imperiously, her head swiveling occasionally to gaze at her snoring master. Once or twice she clicked her beak impatiently, but Harry was too deeply asleep to hear her.

A large trunk stood in the very middle of the room. Its lid was open; it looked expectant; yet it was almost empty but for a residue of old underwear, sweets, empty ink bottles, and broken quills that coated the very bottom. Nearby, on the floor, lay a purple leaflet emblazoned with the words:

————— ISSUED ON BEHALF OF —————

The Ministry of Magic

PROTECTING YOUR HOME AND FAMILY AGAINST DARK FORCES

The Wizarding community is currently under threat from an organization calling itself the Death Eaters. Observing the following simple security guidelines will help protect you, your family, and your home from attack.

1. You are advised not to leave the house alone.
2. Particular care should be taken during the hours of darkness. Wherever possible, arrange to complete journeys before night has fallen.
3. Review the security arrangements around your house, making sure that all family members are aware of emergency measures such as Shield and Disillusionment Charms, and, in the case of underage family members, Side-Along-Apparition.
4. Agree on security questions with close friends and family so as to detect Death Eaters masquerading as others by use of the Polyjuice Potion (see page 2).
5. Should you feel that a family member, colleague, friend, or neighbor is acting in a strange manner, contact the Magical Law Enforcement Squad at once. They may have been put under the Imperius Curse (see page 4).
6. Should the Dark Mark appear over any dwelling place or other building, DO NOT ENTER, but contact the Auror office immediately.

7. Unconfirmed sightings suggest that the Death Eaters *may* now be using Inferi (see page 10). Any sighting of an Inferius, or encounter with same, should be reported to the Ministry IMMEDIATELY.

Harry grunted in his sleep and his face slid down the window an inch or so, making his glasses still more lopsided, but he did not wake up. An alarm clock, repaired by Harry several years ago, ticked loudly on the sill, showing one minute to eleven. Beside it, held in place by Harry's relaxed hand, was a piece of parchment covered in thin, slanting writing. Harry had read this letter so often since its arrival three days ago that although it had been delivered in a tightly furled scroll, it now lay quite flat.

Dear Harry,

If it is convenient to you, I shall call at number four, Privet Drive this coming Friday at eleven P.M. to escort you to the Burrow, where you have been invited to spend the remainder of your school holidays.

If you are agreeable, I should also be glad of your assistance in a matter to which I hope to attend on the way to the Burrow. I shall explain this more fully when I see you.

Kindly send your answer by return of this owl. Hoping to see you this Friday,

I am, yours most sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Though he already knew it by heart, Harry had been stealing glances at this missive every few minutes since seven o'clock that evening, when he had first taken up his position beside his bedroom window, which had a reasonable view of both ends of Privet Drive. He knew it was pointless to keep rereading Dumbledore's words; Harry had sent back his "yes" with the delivering owl, as requested, and all he could do now was wait: Either Dumbledore was going to come, or he was not.

But Harry had not packed. It just seemed too good to be true that he was going to be rescued from the Dursleys after a mere fortnight of their company. He could not shrug off the feeling that something was going to go wrong — his reply to Dumbledore's letter might have gone astray; Dumbledore could be prevented from collecting him; the letter might turn out not to be from Dumbledore at all, but a trick or joke or trap. Harry had not been able to face packing and then being let down and having to unpack again. The only gesture he had made to the possibility of a journey was to shut his snowy owl, Hedwig, safely in her cage.

The minute hand on the alarm clock reached the number twelve and, at that precise moment, the streetlamp outside the window went out.

Harry awoke as though the sudden darkness were an alarm. Hastily straightening his glasses and unsticking his cheek from the glass, he pressed his nose against the window instead and squinted down at the pavement. A tall figure in a long, billowing cloak was walking up the garden path.

Harry jumped up as though he had received an electric shock,

knocked over his chair, and started snatching anything and everything within reach from the floor and throwing it into the trunk. Even as he lobbed a set of robes, two spellbooks, and a packet of crisps across the room, the doorbell rang. Downstairs in the living room his Uncle Vernon shouted, “Who the blazes is calling at this time of night?”

Harry froze with a brass telescope in one hand and a pair of trainers in the other. He had completely forgotten to warn the Dursleys that Dumbledore might be coming. Feeling both panicky and close to laughter, he clambered over the trunk and wrenched open his bedroom door in time to hear a deep voice say, “Good evening. You must be Mr. Dursley. I daresay Harry has told you I would be coming for him?”

Harry ran down the stairs two at a time, coming to an abrupt halt several steps from the bottom, as long experience had taught him to remain out of arm’s reach of his uncle whenever possible. There in the doorway stood a tall, thin man with waist-length silver hair and beard. Half-moon spectacles were perched on his crooked nose, and he was wearing a long black traveling cloak and a pointed hat. Vernon Dursley, whose mustache was quite as bushy as Dumbledore’s, though black, and who was wearing a puce dressing gown, was staring at the visitor as though he could not believe his tiny eyes.

“Judging by your look of stunned disbelief, Harry did *not* warn you that I was coming,” said Dumbledore pleasantly. “However, let us assume that you have invited me warmly into your house. It is unwise to linger overlong on doorsteps in these troubled times.”

He stepped smartly over the threshold and closed the front door

behind him.

“It is a long time since my last visit,” said Dumbledore, peering down his crooked nose at Uncle Vernon. “I must say, your agapanthus are flourishing.”

Vernon Dursley said nothing at all. Harry did not doubt that speech would return to him, and soon — the vein pulsing in his uncle’s temple was reaching danger point — but something about Dumbledore seemed to have robbed him temporarily of breath. It might have been the blatant wizardishness of his appearance, but it might, too, have been that even Uncle Vernon could sense that here was a man whom it would be very difficult to bully.

“Ah, good evening Harry,” said Dumbledore, looking up at him through his half-moon glasses with a most satisfied expression. “Excellent, excellent.”

These words seemed to rouse Uncle Vernon. It was clear that as far as he was concerned, any man who could look at Harry and say “excellent” was a man with whom he could never see eye to eye.

“I don’t mean to be rude —” he began, in a tone that threatened rudeness in every syllable.

“— yet, sadly, accidental rudeness occurs alarmingly often,” Dumbledore finished the sentence gravely. “Best to say nothing at all, my dear man. Ah, and this must be Petunia.”

The kitchen door had opened, and there stood Harry’s aunt, wearing rubber gloves and a housecoat over her nightdress, clearly halfway through her usual pre-bedtime wipe-down of all the kitchen surfaces. Her rather horsey face registered nothing but shock.

“Albus Dumbledore,” said Dumbledore, when Uncle Vernon failed

to effect an introduction. “We have corresponded, of course.” Harry thought this an odd way of reminding Aunt Petunia that he had once sent her an exploding letter, but Aunt Petunia did not challenge the term. “And this must be your son, Dudley?”

Dudley had that moment peered round the living room door. His large, blond head rising out of the stripy collar of his pajamas looked oddly disembodied, his mouth gaping in astonishment and fear. Dumbledore waited a moment or two, apparently to see whether any of the Dursleys were going to say anything, but as the silence stretched on he smiled.

“Shall we assume that you have invited me into your sitting room?”

Dudley scrambled out of the way as Dumbledore passed him. Harry, still clutching the telescope and trainers, jumped the last few stairs and followed Dumbledore, who had settled himself in the armchair nearest the fire and was taking in the surroundings with an expression of benign interest. He looked quite extraordinarily out of place.

“Aren’t — aren’t we leaving, sir?” Harry asked anxiously.

“Yes, indeed we are, but there are a few matters we need to discuss first,” said Dumbledore. “And I would prefer not to do so in the open. We shall trespass upon your aunt and uncle’s hospitality only a little longer.”

“You will, will you?”

Vernon Dursley had entered the room, Petunia at his shoulder, and Dudley skulking behind them both.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore simply, “I shall.”

He drew his wand so rapidly that Harry barely saw it; with a casual flick, the sofa zoomed forward and knocked the knees out from under all three of the Dursleys so that they collapsed upon it in a heap. Another flick of the wand and the sofa zoomed back to its original position.

“We may as well be comfortable,” said Dumbledore pleasantly.

As he replaced his wand in his pocket, Harry saw that his hand was blackened and shriveled; it looked as though his flesh had been burned away.

“Sir — what happened to your — ?”

“Later, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Please sit down.”

Harry took the remaining armchair, choosing not to look at the Dursleys, who seemed stunned into silence.

“I would assume that you were going to offer me refreshment,” Dumbledore said to Uncle Vernon, “but the evidence so far suggests that that would be optimistic to the point of foolishness.”

A third twitch of the wand, and a dusty bottle and five glasses appeared in midair. The bottle tipped and poured a generous measure of honey-colored liquid into each of the glasses, which then floated to each person in the room.

“Madam Rosmerta’s finest oak-matured mead,” said Dumbledore, raising his glass to Harry, who caught hold of his own and sipped. He had never tasted anything like it before, but enjoyed it immensely. The Dursleys, after quick, scared looks at one another, tried to ignore their glasses completely, a difficult feat, as they were nudging them gently on the sides of their heads. Harry could not suppress a suspicion that Dumbledore was rather enjoying himself.

“Well, Harry,” said Dumbledore, turning toward him, “a difficulty has arisen which I hope you will be able to solve for us. By *us*, I mean the Order of the Phoenix. But first of all I must tell you that Sirius’s will was discovered a week ago and that he left you everything he owned.”

Over on the sofa, Uncle Vernon’s head turned, but Harry did not look at him, nor could he think of anything to say except, “Oh. Right.”

“This is, in the main, fairly straightforward,” Dumbledore went on. “You add a reasonable amount of gold to your account at Gringotts, and you inherit all of Sirius’s personal possessions. The slightly problematic part of the legacy —”

“His godfather’s dead?” said Uncle Vernon loudly from the sofa. Dumbledore and Harry both turned to look at him. The glass of mead was now knocking quite insistently on the side of Vernon’s head; he attempted to beat it away. “He’s dead? His godfather?”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. He did not ask Harry why he had not confided in the Dursleys. “Our problem,” he continued to Harry, as if there had been no interruption, “is that Sirius also left you number twelve, Grimmauld Place.”

“He’s been left a house?” said Uncle Vernon greedily, his small eyes narrowing, but nobody answered him.

“You can keep using it as headquarters,” said Harry. “I don’t care. You can have it, I don’t really want it.” Harry never wanted to set foot in number twelve, Grimmauld Place again if he could help it. He thought he would be haunted forever by the memory of Sirius prowling its dark musty rooms alone, imprisoned within the place he had wanted so desperately to leave.

“That is generous,” said Dumbledore. “We have, however, vacated the building temporarily.”

“Why?”

“Well,” said Dumbledore, ignoring the mutterings of Uncle Vernon, who was now being rapped smartly over the head by the persistent glass of mead, “Black family tradition decreed that the house was handed down the direct line, to the next male with the name of ‘Black.’ Sirius was the very last of the line as his younger brother, Regulus, predeceased him and both were childless. While his will makes it perfectly plain that he wants you to have the house, it is nevertheless possible that some spell or enchantment has been set upon the place to ensure that it cannot be owned by anyone other than a pureblood.”

A vivid image of the shrieking, spitting portrait of Sirius’s mother that hung in the hall of number twelve, Grimmauld Place flashed into Harry’s mind. “I bet there has,” he said.

“Quite,” said Dumbledore. “And if such an enchantment exists, then the ownership of the house is most likely to pass to the eldest of Sirius’s living relatives, which would mean his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange.”

Without realizing what he was doing, Harry sprang to his feet; the telescope and trainers in his lap rolled across the floor. Bellatrix Lestrange, Sirius’s killer, inherit his house?

“No,” he said.

“Well, obviously we would prefer that she didn’t get it either,” said Dumbledore calmly. “The situation is fraught with complications. We do not know whether the enchantments we

ourselves have placed upon it, for example, making it Unplottable, will hold now that ownership has passed from Sirius's hands. It might be that Bellatrix will arrive on the doorstep at any moment. Naturally we had to move out until such time as we have clarified the position."

"But how are you going to find out if I'm allowed to own it?"

"Fortunately," said Dumbledore, "there is a simple test."

He placed his empty glass on a small table beside his chair, but before he could do anything else, Uncle Vernon shouted, "*Will you get these ruddy things off us?*"

Harry looked around; all three of the Dursleys were cowering with their arms over their heads as their glasses bounced up and down on their skulls, their contents flying everywhere.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Dumbledore politely, and he raised his wand again. All three glasses vanished. "But it would have been better manners to drink it, you know."

It looked as though Uncle Vernon was bursting with any number of unpleasant retorts, but he merely shrank back into the cushions with Aunt Petunia and Dudley and said nothing, keeping his small piggy eyes on Dumbledore's wand.

"You see," Dumbledore said, turning back to Harry and again speaking as though Uncle Vernon had not uttered, "if you have indeed inherited the house, you have also inherited —"

He flicked his wand for a fifth time. There was a loud crack, and a house-elf appeared, with a snout for a nose, giant bat's ears, and enormous bloodshot eyes, crouching on the Dursleys' shag carpet and covered in grimy rags. Aunt Petunia let out a hair-raising shriek;

nothing this filthy had entered her house in living memory. Dudley drew his large, bare, pink feet off the floor and sat with them raised almost above his head, as though he thought the creature might run up his pajama trousers, and Uncle Vernon bellowed, “What the *hell* is that?”

“Kreacher,” finished Dumbledore.

“Kreacher won’t, Kreacher won’t, Kreacher won’t!” croaked the house-elf, quite as loudly as Uncle Vernon, stamping his long, gnarled feet and pulling his ears. “Kreacher belongs to Miss Bellatrix, oh yes, Kreacher belongs to the Blacks, Kreacher wants his new mistress, Kreacher won’t go to the Potter brat, Kreacher won’t, won’t, won’t —”

“As you can see, Harry,” said Dumbledore loudly, over Kreacher’s continued croaks of “won’t, won’t, won’t,” “Kreacher is showing a certain reluctance to pass into your ownership.”

“I don’t care,” said Harry again, looking with disgust at the writhing, stamping house-elf. “I don’t want him.”

“Won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t —”

“You would prefer him to pass into the ownership of Bellatrix Lestrange? Bearing in mind that he has lived at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix for the past year?”

“Won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t —”

Harry stared at Dumbledore. He knew that Kreacher could not be permitted to go and live with Bellatrix Lestrange, but the idea of owning him, of having responsibility for the creature that had betrayed Sirius, was repugnant.

“Give him an order,” said Dumbledore. “If he has passed into your

ownership, he will have to obey. If not, then we shall have to think of some other means of keeping him from his rightful mistress.”

“Won’t, won’t, won’t, WON’T!”

Kreacher’s voice had risen to a scream. Harry could think of nothing to say, except, “Kreacher, shut up!”

It looked for a moment as though Kreacher was going to choke. He grabbed his throat, his mouth still working furiously, his eyes bulging. After a few seconds of frantic gulping, he threw himself face forward onto the carpet (Aunt Petunia whimpered) and beat the floor with his hands and feet, giving himself over to a violent, but entirely silent, tantrum.

“Well, that simplifies matters,” said Dumbledore cheerfully. “It seems that Sirius knew what he was doing. You are the rightful owner of number twelve, Grimmauld Place and of Kreacher.”

“Do I — do I have to keep him with me?” Harry asked, aghast, as Kreacher thrashed around at his feet.

“Not if you don’t want to,” said Dumbledore. “If I might make a suggestion, you could send him to Hogwarts to work in the kitchen there. In that way, the other house-elves could keep an eye on him.”

“Yeah,” said Harry in relief, “yeah, I’ll do that. Er — Kreacher — I want you to go to Hogwarts and work in the kitchens there with the other house-elves.”

Kreacher, who was now lying flat on his back with his arms and legs in the air, gave Harry one upside-down look of deepest loathing and, with another loud crack, vanished.

“Good,” said Dumbledore. “There is also the matter of the hippogriff, Buckbeak. Hagrid has been looking after him since Sirius

died, but Buckbeak is yours now, so if you would prefer to make different arrangements —”

“No,” said Harry at once, “he can stay with Hagrid. I think Buckbeak would prefer that.”

“Hagrid will be delighted,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “He was thrilled to see Buckbeak again. Incidentally, we have decided, in the interests of Buckbeak’s safety, to rechristen him ‘Witherwings’ for the time being, though I doubt that the Ministry would ever guess he is the hippogriff they once sentenced to death. Now, Harry, is your trunk packed?”

“Erm . . .”

“Doubtful that I would turn up?” Dumbledore suggested shrewdly.

“I’ll just go and — er — finish off,” said Harry hastily, hurrying to pick up his fallen telescope and trainers.

It took him a little over ten minutes to track down everything he needed; at last he had managed to extract his Invisibility Cloak from under the bed, screwed the top back on his jar of color-change ink, and forced the lid of his trunk shut on his cauldron. Then, heaving his trunk in one hand and holding Hedwig’s cage in the other, he made his way back downstairs.

He was disappointed to discover that Dumbledore was not waiting in the hall, which meant that he had to return to the living room.

Nobody was talking. Dumbledore was humming quietly, apparently quite at his ease, but the atmosphere was thicker than cold custard, and Harry did not dare look at the Dursleys as he said, “Professor — I’m ready now.”

“Good,” said Dumbledore. “Just one last thing, then.” And he

turned to speak to the Dursleys once more.

“As you will no doubt be aware, Harry comes of age in a year’s time —”

“No,” said Aunt Petunia, speaking for the first time since Dumbledore’s arrival.

“I’m sorry?” said Dumbledore politely.

“No, he doesn’t. He’s a month younger than Dudley, and Dudders doesn’t turn eighteen until the year after next.”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore pleasantly, “but in the Wizing world, we come of age at seventeen.”

Uncle Vernon muttered, “Preposterous,” but Dumbledore ignored him.

“Now, as you already know, the wizard called Lord Voldemort has returned to this country. The Wizing community is currently in a state of open warfare. Harry, whom Lord Voldemort has already attempted to kill on a number of occasions, is in even greater danger now than the day when I left him upon your doorstep fifteen years ago, with a letter explaining about his parents’ murder and expressing the hope that you would care for him as though he were your own.”

Dumbledore paused, and although his voice remained light and calm, and he gave no obvious sign of anger, Harry felt a kind of chill emanating from him and noticed that the Dursleys drew very slightly closer together.

“You did not do as I asked. You have never treated Harry as a son. He has known nothing but neglect and often cruelty at your hands. The best that can be said is that he has at least escaped the appalling damage you have inflicted upon the unfortunate boy sitting between

you.”

Both Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon looked around instinctively, as though expecting to see someone other than Dudley squeezed between them.

“Us — mistreat Dudders? What d’you — ?” began Uncle Vernon furiously, but Dumbledore raised his finger for silence, a silence which fell as though he had struck Uncle Vernon dumb.

“The magic I evoked fifteen years ago means that Harry has powerful protection while he can still call this house ‘home.’ However miserable he has been here, however unwelcome, however badly treated, you have at least, grudgingly, allowed him houseroom. This magic will cease to operate the moment that Harry turns seventeen; in other words, at the moment he becomes a man. I ask only this: that you allow Harry to return, once more, to this house, before his seventeenth birthday, which will ensure that the protection continues until that time.”

None of the Dursleys said anything. Dudley was frowning slightly, as though he was still trying to work out when he had ever been mistreated. Uncle Vernon looked as though he had something stuck in his throat; Aunt Petunia, however, was oddly flushed.

“Well, Harry . . . time for us to be off,” said Dumbledore at last, standing up and straightening his long black cloak. “Until we meet again,” he said to the Dursleys, who looked as though that moment could wait forever as far as they were concerned, and after doffing his hat, he swept from the room.

“Bye,” said Harry hastily to the Dursleys, and followed Dumbledore, who paused beside Harry’s trunk, upon which

Hedwig's cage was perched.

“We do not want to be encumbered by these just now,” he said, pulling out his wand again. “I shall send them to the Burrow to await us there. However, I would like you to bring your Invisibility Cloak . . . just in case.”

Harry extracted his Cloak from his trunk with some difficulty, trying not to show Dumbledore the mess within. When he had stuffed it into an inside pocket of his jacket, Dumbledore waved his wand and the trunk, cage, and Hedwig vanished. Dumbledore then waved his wand again, and the front door opened onto cool, misty darkness.

“And now, Harry, let us step out into the night and pursue that flighty temptress, adventure.”

Sal en sallie

Harry Potter snork hard. Hy het amper vier uur lank op 'n stoel **langs** sy slaapkamer se venster gesit en uitstaar oor die straat wat al **donkerder** word en uiteindelik met die een kant van sy gesig teen **die** koue ruit vasgedruk aan die slaap geraak. Sy bril sit skeef en sy **mond** is wyd oop. Die mistigheid wat sy asem op die venster vorm, **glinster** in die oranje gloed van die straatlamp buite en die kunslig laat **sy** gesig doodsbleek lyk onder sy welige bos deurmekaar swart hare.

Die kamer is besaai met verskeie van sy besittings, en ook 'n hele hoop gemors. Uilvere, appelstronke en lekkergoedpapier is oor die vloer gestrooi, 'n paar towerspreukboeke lê tussen die warboel opgefrommelde mantels op sy bed en die lig op sy lessenaar val op 'n klomp koerante wat morsig rond en bont neergegooi is. Die eerste een se hoofopskrif roep in hoofletters uit:

HARRY POTTER: DIE UITVERKORENE?

Gerugte vlieg nog steeds rond oor die geheimsinnige voorval onlangs by die Ministerie van Towerkuns waartydens Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie weer eens opgemerk is.

“Ons mag nie daaroor praat nie. Moet my niks vra nie,” het een ontstelde Uitwisser gesê en geweier om sy naam vir ons te gee toe hy die Ministerie gisteraand verlaat.

Nogtans het bronne wat hoë posisies in die Ministerie beklee, bevestig dat die voorval hom om die befaamde Saal van Profesieë afgespeel het.

Alhoewel die Ministerie se woordvoertowenaars tot dusver geweier het om selfs te erken dat daar so 'n plek bestaan, glo al hoe meer lede van die towenaarsgemeenskap die Doodseters, wat nou vonnisse in Azkaban vir onwettige betreding en poging tot diefstal uitdien, het probeer om 'n profesie te steel. Die aard van die profesie is onbekend, hoewel daar gespekuleer word dat dit Harry Potter raak. Potter is sover bekend die enigste persoon wat nog die Moordvloek

oorleef het en hy was die betrokke aand klaarblyklik in die Ministerie. Party mense gaan sover om Potter die "Uitverkorene" te noem, want hulle glo die profesie wys hom aan as die enigste een wat ons van Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie sal bevry.

Niemand weet waar die profesie, indien dit ooit bestaan, tans is nie, alhoewel (verv. bladsy 2, kolom 5)

'n Tweede koerant lê langs die eerste een en het die volgende hoofopskrif:

SCRIMGEOUR VOLG FUDGE OP

Die grootste gedeelte van die voorblad bestaan uit 'n groot swart-wit foto van 'n man met hare so dik soos 'n leeu se maanhare en 'n taamlik vernielde gesig. Die foto beweeg – die man waai vir die plafon.

Rufus Scrimgeour, voormalige hoof van die Auror-kantoor in die Departement van Magiese Wetstoepassing, het Cornelius Fudge as Minister van Towerkuns opgevolg. Die towenaarsgemeenskap het hierdie aanstelling grotendeels met entoesiasme begroet, al was daar enkele ure ná Scrimgeour se aanstelling reeds gerugte van onenigheid tussen die nuwe minister en Albus Dumbledore, pas herstel in die amp van Hoof towenaar van die Ringkoptowenaars.

Scrimgeour se verteenwoordigers het erken dat hy en Dumbledore samesprekings gevoer het onmiddellik nadat hy hierdie hoë amp betree het, maar geweier om kommentaar te lewer oor wat die twee bespreek het. Albus Dumbledore is daarvoor bekend dat hy (verv. bladsy 3, kolom 2)

Links van hierdie koerant lê daar nog een wat só gevou is dat die storie met die opskrif MINISTERIE WAARBORG STUDENTE SE VEILIGHEID sigbaar is.

Die pas aangestelde Minister van Towerkuns, Rufus Scrimgeour, het vandag aangekondig dat sy Ministerie streng nuwe maatreëls sal tref om die veiligheid van studente wat hierdie herfs na die Hogwarts Skool vir Heksery en Townary terugkeer, te verseker.

"Om verklaarbare redes gaan die Ministerie nie besonderhede bekend maak oor die streng nuwe veiligheidsmaatreëls nie," het die Minister gesê, alhoewel 'n ingeligte bron bevestig het dat die maatreëls verdedigende towerspreuke en paljasse insluit, asook 'n komplekse reeks teenvloeke en 'n klein taakmag Aurors met die uitsluitlike doel om die Hogwarts Skool te beskerm.

Die meeste mense blyk gerusgestel te wees noudat die nuwe Minister so sterk standpunt ingeneem het oor die studente se veiligheid. Mevrouw Augusta Longbottom sê: "My kleinseun, Neville – 'n goeie vriend van Harry Potter wat terloops Juniemaand saam met hom in die Ministerie teen die Doodseters geveg het en –

Maar die res van hierdie storie lê onder 'n groot voëlkou ingedruk. Binne-in is daar 'n pragtige sneeu-uil. Haar amber oë swiep waaksaam oor die kamer en sy draai haar kop nou en dan skuins en kyk na haar snorkende baas. Sy klik een of twee keer ongeduldig met haar bek, maar Harry slaap te vas om haar te hoor.

'n Groot trommel staan in die middel van die kamer. Die deksel is oop, asof in afwagting vir iets, maar die trommel is so te sê leeg, afgesien van 'n paar onderbroeke, lekkers, leë inkbottels en gebreekte veerpenne onder op die bodem. Daar naby, op die vloer, lê 'n pers pamflet waarop daar in sierskrif staan:

Uitgereik namens die Ministerie van Towerkuns
BESKERM JOU HUIS EN GESIN
TEEN DONKER MAGTE

Die towenaarsgemeenskap word tans bedreig deur 'n organisasie wat homself die Doodseters noem. Volg die volgende eenvoudige veiligheidsriglyne om jou, jou gesin en jou huis teen aanvalle te beskerm:

1. Moenie jou huis alleen verlaat nie.
2. Wees ekstra versigtig ná donker. Waar moontlik, reël dat jy jou reise voltooi voordat dit nag word.
3. Gaan die veiligheidsmaatreëls in en om jou huis na, maak seker al die gesinslede is bewus van noodmaatreëls soos Skild- en Ontrugteringspaljasse en, in die geval van minderjarige gesinslede, Sy-aan-sy Apparering.
4. Spreek met goeie vriende en jou gesin af watter sekuriteitsvrae julle sal vra aan Doodeters wat hulle met behulp van die Polisouspaljas as ander voordoen (sien bladsy 2).
5. Indien jy voel 'n gesinslid, kollega, vriend of een van die bure tree vreemd op, kontak dadelik die Magiese Wetstoepassingspatroillie. Hulle mag moontlik onder die Imperius-vloek geplaas wees (sien bladsy 4).
6. Indien die Donker Merk bokant enige woning of ander gebou verskyn, moet jy BUITE BLY en die Auror-kantoor onmiddellik kontak.

7. Onbevestigde berigte van verskynings dui daarop dat die Doodsters moontlik die Inferi (sien bladsy 10) gebruik. Enigeen wat 'n Inferius sien of met een in aanraking kom, moet dit ONMIDDELIK aan die Ministerie rapporteer.

Harry kreun in sy slaap en sy gesig gly 'n entjie teen die venster af sodat sy bril nog skewer sit, maar hy word nie wakker nie. Die wekker wat Harry 'n paar jaar gelede reggemaak het, tik hard op die vensterbank en wys dit is een minuut voor elf. Langs die wekker, onder Harry se ontspanne hand, lê 'n stukkie perkament waarop daar in 'n dun, skuins handskrif geskryf is. Harry het die brief al soveel keer gelees vandat dit drie dae gelede aangekom het dat dit nou heeltemal plat lê, al is dit styf opgerol afgelewer.

Liewe Harry,

As dit vir jou gerieflik is, sal ek eerskomende Vrydag om elf namiddag by Ligusterlaan 4 aandoen om jou te vergesel na Die Konynenes waarheen jy genooi is om die res van jou skoolvakansie deur te bring.

As dit jou welgeval, sal ek dit ook waardeer as jy my behulpzaam kan wees met 'n aangeleentheid waarna ons hopelik onderweg na Die Konynenes kan omsien. Ek sal meer breedvoerig verduidelik wanneer ek jou sien.

Stuur asseblief jou antwoord per kerende pos saam met hierdie uil. Ek hoop ons sien mekaar Vrydag.

Vriendelike groete, soos altyd,

Albus Dumbledore

Al het hy dit uit sy kop geken, het Harry kort-kort na hierdie brief gekyk vandat hy sewe-uur vanaand stelling by sy kamervenster ingeneem het sodat hy 'n redelike uitsig oor albei kante van Ligusterlaan kan hê. Hy het geweet dit is sinneloos om Dumbledore se woorde oor en oor te lees. Harry het sy "ja" soos versoek dadelik saam met die uil wat die brief kom aflewer het, teruggestuur en al wat hy toe kon doen, was om te wag: Dumbledore sou óf opdaag óf nie.

Maar Harry het nie ingepak nie. Dit was net te goed om waar te wees dat hy van die Dursleys verlos sou word nadat hy net twee weke in hul geselskap moes deurbring. Hy kon nie die gevoel afskud dat iets gaan skeefloop nie – sy antwoord op Dumbledore se brief het dalk verlore geraak; iets kon dalk verhoed dat Dumbledore hom kom haal; die brief was dalk glad nie van Dumbledore nie, maar 'n poets of 'n grap of 'n lokval. Harry het nie kans gesien om

in te pak en dan in die steek gelaat te word en weer te moet uitpak **nie**. Al wat hy gedoen het om vir die moontlike reis voor te berei, **was** om sy sneeu-uil, Hedwig, veilig in haar kou toe te maak.

Die wekker se minuutwyser beweeg tot op twaalf en op daardie **presiese** oomblik gaan die straatlamp buite die venster dood.

Harry word wakker asof die skielike donkerte 'n wekker is wat **afgaan**. Hy sit sy bril haastig reg op, trek sy wang los van die ruit, **druk** in stede daarvan sy neus teen die venster, knip sy oë vinnig en **kyk** af sypaadjie toe. 'n Lang figuur in 'n vollengte, golwende mantel loop by die tuinpaadjie op.

Harry spring op asof hy nou net 'n elektriese skok gekry het, skop sy stoel om, begin enigiets en alles binne sy bereik van die vloer af **opraap** en gooi dit in die trommel. Soos wat hy 'n paar mantels, twee **towerspreukboeke** en 'n pakkie skyfies oor die lengte van die kamer **daarin** gooi, lui die deurklokkie.

Onder in die sitkamer skree sy oom Vernon: "Wie de duiwel kom **hierdie** tyd van die aand kuier?"

Harry verstar met 'n kopertelekoop in een hand en twee tekkies **in** die ander een. Hy het heeltemal vergeet om die Dursleys te waar- **sku** dat Dumbledore dalk gaan kom. Tegelyk paniekerig en laggerig klouter hy oor die trommel en pluk sy kamerdeur net betyds oop om te hoor hoe 'n diep stem sê: "U moet meneer Dursley wees. Ek **neem** aan Harry het vir u gesê ek kom hom haal?"

Harry hardloop die trappe twee-twee af en stop 'n paar tree van onder af inderhaas, want jare lange ondervinding het hom geleer om sover moontlik altyd 'n armlengte van sy oom af te bly. In die voordeur staan 'n lang, maer man wie se silwer hare en baard tot op sy middellyf hang. Sy halfmaanbril sit hoog op sy krom neus en hy dra 'n lang swart reismantel en 'n gepunte hoed. Vernon Dursley, wie se snor net so welig soos Dumbledore s'n is maar swart, en wat 'n donkerbruin kamerjas dra, staar na die besoeker asof hy sy klein ogies nie kan glo nie.

"Te oordeel na u uitdrukking van verstomde ongeloof het Harry u **nie** gewaarsku dat ek gaan kom nie," sê Dumbledore vriendelik. "Maar kom ons neem aan u het my hartlik by u huis ingenooi. Dit is onwys om in hierdie moeilike tye té lank voor 'n oop voordeur te vertoef."

Hy tree flink oor die drumpel en maak die voordeur agter hom toe.

"Daar het baie tyd verloop sedert my vorige besoek," sê Dumbledore en tuur by sy krom neus af na oom Vernon. "Ek moet sê, julle agapante floreer."

Vernon Dursley sê nie 'n woord nie. Harry weet vir seker sy tong sal weer loskom, en sommer gou ook – die aar wat so langs

sy oom se slaap klop, bereik nou gevaarpunt – maar iets omtrent Dumbledore het sy asem tydelik weggeslaan. Dalk is dit die feit dat hy so blatant soos 'n towenaar aangetrek is, of dalk is dit omdat selfs oom Vernon kan aanvoel dat hy 'n man is wat 'n mens bitter moeilik kan boelie.

“A, goeienaand, Harry,” sê Dumbledore en kyk met 'n baie tevrede uitdrukking deur sy halfmaanbril op na hom. “Uitstekend, uitstekend.”

Dit is asof hierdie woorde oom Vernon wakker skud. Sover dit hom aangaan, is enige man wat na Harry kan kyk en “uitstekend” sê, duidelik 'n man met wie hy nooit oor enigiets sal saamstem nie.

“Ek wil nie onbeskof wees nie – ” begin hy in 'n stemtoon wat elke lettergreep van dreigende onbeskoftheid laat spreek.

“– maar, helaas, kom toevallige onbeskoftheid ontstellend dikwels voor,” voltooi Dumbledore die sin somber. “Dis beter om eerder niks te sê nie, liewe vriend. A, en dit moet Petunia wees.”

Die kombuis deur het oopgegaan, en daar staan Harry se tante met rubberhandskoene en 'n jurk oor haar nagrok, duidelik halfpad deur haar gewone roetine om al die kombuisoppervlakke voor slapenstyd silwerskoon af te vee. Haar perdagtige gesig registreer uiterste skok.

“Albus Dumbledore,” sê Dumbledore toe oom Vernon hulle nie aan mekaar voorstel nie. “Ons het natuurlik al gekorrespondeer.” Harry dink dit is nogal 'n snaakse manier om tant Petunia daaraan te herinner dat hy eenkeer vir haar 'n Skeller gestuur het, maar tant Petunia bevraagteken nie die woord nie. “En dit moet julle seun, Dudley, wees?”

Dudley loer by die sitkamer deur uit. Sy groot, blonde kop wat bo sy pajamas se strepieskraag uitrys, lyk op 'n vreemde manier liggaamloos; sy mond hang oop van verbasing en vrees. Dumbledore wag vir 'n oomblik of twee, blykbaar om te sien of een van die Dursleys iets gaan sê, maar die stilte duur voort en hy glimlag innemend.

“Sal ons aanneem julle het my sitkamer toe genooi?”

Dudley skarrel uit die pad en Dumbledore stap in. Harry, wat nog steeds die teleskoop en tekkies vasklou, spring die laaste paar trappe af tot onder en volg Dumbledore wat hom tuismaak in die leunstoel naaste aan die vuur en die vertrek met 'n uitdrukking van vriendelike belangstelling betrag. Hy lyk besonder misplaas.

“Is ons nie – op pad nie, professor?” vra Harry angstig.

“Ja, inderdaad, ons is, maar daar is 'n paar sakies wat ons eers moet bespreek,” antwoord Dumbledore. “En ek verkies om dit nie in die buitelug te doen nie. Dus gaan ek nog 'n rukkie langer misbruik maak van jou tante en oom se gasvryheid.”

“Gaan jy?”

Vernon Dursley het by die vertrek ingekom met Petunia aan sy sy en Dudley wat agter hulle probeer wegkoes.

“Ja,” sê Dumbledore gewoon. “Ek gaan.”

Hy bring sy towerstaf só vinnig te voorskyn dat Harry dit skaars sien; net een vlugtige swiep en die rusbank zoem vorentoe en slaan al drie Dursleys se voete onder hulle uit sodat hulle in ’n hoop daarop neerslaan. Nog ’n swiep met die towerstaf en die rusbank zoem terug na sy oorspronklike posisie.

“Ons kan net sowel gemaklik wees,” sê Dumbledore ewe galant.

Hy steek sy towerstaf terug in sy sak en Harry sien sy hand is swart en verskrompel; dit lyk asof die vleis weggebrand is.

“Professor – wat het gebeur met u – ?”

“Later, Harry,” sê Dumbledore. “Sit, asseblief.”

Harry gaan sit in die oorblywende leunstoel en kyk eerder nie na die Dursleys wat nog steeds nie ’n geluid maak nie.

“Ek het aanvaar julle gaan vir my iets te drinke aanbied,” sê Dumbledore vir oom Vernon, “maar julle optrede tot dusver laat my dink dit was dwase optimisme.”

Dumbledore haal weer sy towerstaf uit, swaai dit ’n derde keer en ’n stowwerige bottel en vyf glase verskyn hoog in die lug. Terwyl Dumbledore sy towerstaf bêre, skink die bottel vanself ’n rojale hoeveelheid heuningkleurige vloeistof in elk van die glase wat dan tot by elkeen in die vertrek sweef.

“Madame Rosmerta se beste heuningbier wat in eikehout verouder is,” sê Dumbledore en lig sy glas vir Harry wat sy eie een beetgekry en ’n sluk geneem het. Hy het nog nooit so iets geproe nie, maar hy hou baie daarvan. Die Dursleys loer vinnig en bang vir mekaar en probeer dan om hul glase heeltemal te ignoreer, maar dit is moeilik, want die glase klop aanhoudend liggies aan die kant van hul koppe. Harry kry die idee dat Dumbledore die situasie nogal geniet.

“Wel, Harry,” sê Dumbledore en draai na hom, “daar het ’n probleem opgeduik wat ek hoop jy vir ons sal kan oplos. Met ‘ons’ bedoel ek die Orde van die Feniks. Maar eerstens moet ek jou meedeel dat Sirius se testament ’n week gelede gevind is en dat hy alles wat hy besit het aan jou nagelaat het.”

Op die rusbank draai oom Vernon se kop, maar Harry kyk nie vir hom nie en al waaraan hy kan dink om te sê is: “O. Reg.”

“Dit is grotendeels taamlik eenvoudig,” gaan Dumbledore voort. “Jy kan ’n aansienlike hoeveelheid goud by jou rekening by Gringotts voeg en jy erf al Sirius se persoonlike besittings. Die effens problematiese deel van die erflating – ”

“Is sy peetpa dood?” vra oom Vernon hard van die rusbank af.

Dumbledore en Harry draai albei na hom toe. Die glas heuningbier klop nou met mening teen oom Vernon se kop en hy probeer dit wegklap. “Hy’s dood? Sy peetpa?”

“Ja,” sê Dumbledore. Hy vra nie hoekom Harry nie die Dursleys daarvan vertel het nie. “Ons probleem,” vertel hy verder vir Harry asof daar nie ’n onderbreking was nie, “is dat Sirius ook Grimmauldplein 12 aan jou bemaak het.”

“Hy het ’n huis geërf?” sê-vra oom Vernon gulsig en sy klein ogies vernou, maar niemand antwoord hom nie.

“Julle kan dit nog steeds as Hoofkwartier gebruik,” sê Harry. “Ek gee nie om nie. Julle kan die plek maar kry ook; ek wil dit nie eintlik hê nie.” As hy dit kan verhelp, wil Harry nooit weer sy voete in Grimmauldplein 12 sit nie. Die gedagte aan Sirius wat stoksielalleen op en af in daardie muwwe vertrekke loop en vasgekeer is in die plek waaruit hy so desperaat wou kom, sal vir ewig by hom spook.

“Dit is ruimhartig van jou,” sê Dumbledore. “Ons het die gebou egter tydelik ontruim.”

“Hoekom?”

“Wel,” sê Dumbledore en ignoreer oom Vernon se gebrom oor die koppige glas heuningbier wat hom nou lelik bykom, “Sirius Black se familietradisie bepaal dat die huis binne die direkte bloedlyn oorgedra moet word aan die volgende manspersoon met die van Black. Sirius was die heel laaste een in hierdie lyn aangesien sy jonger broer, Regulus, voor hom te sterwe gekom het en hulle albei kinderloos was. Hoewel sy testament uitdruklik bepaal dat hy wil hê jy moet die huis kry, is dit nogtans moontlik dat een of ander towerspreuk of paljas oor die huis uitgespreek is om te verseker dat niemand anders as ’n volbloed dit mag besit nie.”

Voor sy geestesoog sien Harry duidelik die beeld van die glilende, spoegende portret van Sirius se ma wat teen die muur in Grimmauldplein 12 hang. “Ek is seker daar is so iets,” sê hy.

“Juistement,” sê Dumbledore. “En indien daar so ’n paljas bestaan, sal die eienaarskap van die huis heel moontlik na Sirius se oudste lewende naasbestaande moet gaan – niemand anders nie as sy niggie, Bellatrix Lestrange.”

Sonder om te besef wat hy doen, spring Harry op sy voete; die teleskoop en tekkies op sy skoot rol oor die vloer. Bellatrix Lestrange, Sirius se moordenaar, gaan sy huis erf?

“Nee,” sê hy.

“Wel, ons sal natuurlik ook verkies dat sy dit nie moet kry nie,” sê Dumbledore kalm. “Die situasie is uiters ingewikkeld. Ons weet nie of die towerspreuke wat ons self daaroor uitgespreek het om dit

onvindbaar te maak nog van krag sal wees wanneer die eienaarskap uit Sirius se hande gaan nie. Bellatrix kan dalk enige oomblik by die voordeur opdaag. Daarom moes ons daar uittrek tot tyd en wyl die situasie opgeklaar is.”

“Maar hoe gaan ons uitvind of die huis myne mag word?”

“Gelukkig,” sê Dumbledore, “is daar ’n eenvoudige toets.”

Hy sit sy leë glas op ’n tafeltjie langs sy stoel neer, maar voor hy enigiets anders kan doen, skree oom Vernon: “*Kry hierdie dekselse goed weg van ons af!*”

Harry kyk om; al drie Dursleys hou hul gesigte met hul arms toe en probeer koes vir die glase wat op en af op hul koppe spring en die heuningbier oor hulle uitstort.

“O, ek is jammer,” sê Dumbledore goedgemanierd en haal sy towerstaf weer uit. Al drie glase verdwyn. “Maar dit sou natuurlik beter maniere gewees het om dit te drink, of hoe?”

Dit lyk of oom Vernon ’n hele rits onaangename antwoorde wil kwytraak, maar hy sink net saam met tant Petunia en Dudley terug in die kussings en sê niks nie terwyl sy varkogies die hele tyd op Dumbledore se towerstaf vasgnael bly.

“Sien jy,” sê Dumbledore en draai terug na Harry asof oom Vernon nie bestaan nie, “aangesien jy die huis geërf het, erf jy ook vir – ”

Hy swiep sy towerstaf ’n vyfde keer. Daar is ’n harde klapgeluid en ’n huiself met ’n snoet vir ’n neus, reusevlermuisore en yslike bloedbelope oë hurk skielik in sy vuil vodde op die Dursleys se langhaarmat. Tant Petunia gee ’n gil: In haar dag des lewens was daar nog nooit iets so vieslik vuils in haar huis nie; Dudley pluk sy groot kaal pienk voete van die vloer af op en hou hulle so naby moontlik aan sy kop asof hy dink die skepsel gaan dalk by sy pajamabroek op hardloop, en oom Vernon bulder: “Wat de hel is dit?!”

“Skepsel,” maak Dumbledore sy sin uiteindelik klaar.

“Skepsel sallie, Skepsel sallie, Skepsel sallie!” krys die huiself, amper net so hard soos oom Vernon, terwyl hy sy lang knoetsrige voete stamp en sy ore trek. “Skepsel behoort aan juffrou Bellatrix, o ja, Skepsel behoort aan die Blacks, Skepsel soek sy nuwe meesteres, Skepsel sallie na die bedorwe Potter-brokkie toe gaan nie, Skepsel sallie, sallie, sallie –”

“Soos jy kan sien, Harry,” sê Dumbledore hard bo-oor Skepsel se aanhoudende gejl van “sallie, sallie, sallie”, “toon Skepsel ’n mate van teësin om aan jou te behoort.”

“Ek gee nie om nie,” sê Harry en kyk gewalg na die wriemelende, voetstampende huiself. “Ek wil hom nie hê nie.”

“Sallie, sallie, sallie, sallie –”

“Sal jy verkies dat hy Bellatrix Lestrage se eiendom word? Hou in gedagte dat hy al die afgelope jaar in die Orde van die Feniks se Hoofkwartier woon.”

“Sallie, sallie, sallie – ”

Harry staar na Dumbledore. Hy weet Skepsel kan nie toegelaat word om by Bellatrix Lestrage te gaan bly nie, maar die blote gedagte dat hy hom moet besit en verantwoordelik moet wees vir die skepsel wat Sirius verraaï het, is vir Harry afstootlik.

“Gee hom ’n bevel,” sê Dumbledore. “As hy nou jou eiendom is, sal hy jou moet gehoorsaam. Indien nie, sal ons aan ’n ander manier moet dink om hom van sy regmatige meesteres af weg te hou.”

“Sallie, sallie, sallie, SALLIE!”

Skepsel se stem is nou ’n hoë gil. Harry kan aan niks anders dink om te sê nie as: “Skepsel, sjarrap!”

Dit lyk vir ’n oomblik of Skepsel gaan verstik. Hy gryp na sy keel, sy mond is nog steeds wild vertrek en sy oë peul uit. Ná ’n paar sekondes se frenetiese gesluk gooi hy homself gesig eerste op die mat neer (tant Petunia begin sanik), hamer met sy hande en voete op die vloer en en gee hom oor aan ’n wilde, maar woordelose woedeaanval.

“Wel, dit vereenvoudig sake,” sê Dumbledore opgewek. “Dit lyk of Sirius geweet het wat hy doen. Jy is die regmatige eienaar van Grimmauldplein 12, en van Skepsel.”

“Moet ek – moet ek hom by my hou?” vra Harry verskrik terwyl Skepsel die vloer nog steeds moker.

“Nie as jy nie wil nie,” sê Dumbledore. “As ek ’n voorstel mag maak – hoekom stuur jy hom nie Hogwarts toe om daar in die kombuis te werk nie? Dan sal die ander huiselwe ’n ogie oor hom kan hou.”

“Ja,” sê Harry verlig. “Ja, ek sal dit doen. E – Skepsel – ek wil hê jy moet Hogwarts toe gaan en daar in die kombuis saam met die ander huiselwe gaan werk.”

Skepsel lê teen hierdie tyd al op sy rug met sy arms en bene in die lug. Hy gee vir Harry ’n onderstebo kyk van diepe weersin en verdwyn dan met nog ’n harde klapgeluid.

“Goed,” sê Dumbledore. “Dan is daar ook die kwessie van die Hippogrief, Bokbok. Hagrid kyk sedert Sirius se dood na hom, maar Bokbok behoort nou aan jou, so as jy sou verkies om ander reëlins te tref – ”

“Nee,” sê Harry dadelik. “Hy kan by Hagrid bly. Ek dink dis wat Bokbok sal wil hê.”

“Hagrid sal verheug wees,” sê Dumbledore en glimlag. “Hy was in sy noppies om Bokbok weer te sien. Terloops, ons het besluit, ter wille van Bokbok se veiligheid, om hom voorlopig Flinkvlerk te

noem, hoewel ek twyfel of die Ministerie ooit sal kan raai hy is die Hippogrief wat hulle eens ter dood veroordeel het. Nou ja, Harry, is jou trommel gepak?"

"Em..."

"Gedink ek gaan dalk nie opdaag nie?" vra Dumbledore uitgeslape.

"Ek sal net gou gaan – e – klaarmaak," sê Harry haastig en tel vinnig sy teleskoop en tekkies op.

Dit neem hom net meer as tien minute om alles te kry wat hy nodig het; uiteindelik is sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel onder die bed uit, sy pot Kleurveranderingsink se doppie vasgedraai, sy heksetel bo in sy trommel geboender en die deksel met moeite toegedwing. Met sy trommel in een hand en Hedwig se kou in die ander mik hy af ondertoe.

Hy is teleurgesteld dat Dumbledore nie in die portaal wag nie, want dit beteken hy moet teruggaan sitkamer toe.

Niemand praat nie. Dumbledore neurie saggies, oënskynlik heel op sy gemak, maar die atmosfeer is dikker as koue vla en Harry waag dit nie om na die Dursleys te kyk nie. "Professor – ek is nou gereed."

"Goed so," sê Dumbledore, "maar daar is nog een ding." Hy draai weer na die Dursleys. "Soos julle ongetwyfeld weet, word Harry oor 'n jaar mondig –"

"Nee," sê tant Petunia vir die eerste keer vandat Dumbledore aangekom het iets.

"Ekskuus?" vra Dumbledore beleefd.

"Nee, dis verkeerd. Hy's 'n maand jonger as Dudley en Dudders word eers die jaar ná aanstaande jaar agtien."

"A," sê Dumbledore vriendelik, "maar in die towenaarswêreld word ons al op sewentien mondig."

Oom Vernon brom "belaglik", maar Dumbledore ignoreer hom.

"Nou ja, julle is sekerlik bewus van die feit dat die toenaar genaamd Heer Voldenmort na hierdie land teruggekeer het. Die towenaarsgemeenskap verkeer tans in 'n staat van openlike oorlog. Harry, vir wie die Heer Voldemort al verskeie kere probeer vermoor het, verkeer nou in baie meer gevaar as die dag vyftien jaar gelede toe ek hom voor julle deur kom neersit het met 'n brief wat verduidelik dat sy ouers vermoor is en die hoop uitspreek dat julle hom sal versorg asof hy julle eie is."

Dumbledore bly vir 'n oomblik stil, en alhoewel sy stem lig en kalm bly en hy nie enige sigbare tekens van woede toon nie, voel Harry hy straal 'n soort kilheid uit, en sien hy hoe die Dursleys ongemerk nader na mekaar probeer beweeg.

“Julle het nie gedoen soos ek gevra het nie. Julle het Harry nooit soos julle eie seun behandel nie. Julle het hom verwaarloos en dikwels wreed behandel. Die enigste positiewe ding wat ek kan sê, is dat hy ten minste die skokkende skade wat julle die stomme seun daar tussen julle berokken het, vrygespring het.”

Sowel tant Petunia as oom Vernon kyk instinkties rond asof hulle verwag daar sit iemand anders as Dudley tussen hulle vasgedruk.

“Ons het – Dudders mishandel? Wat probeer jy – ?” begin oom Vernon woedend, maar Dumbledore lig sy vinger vir stilte, ’n stilte wat neerdaal asof hy oom Vernon letterlik dronkgeslaan het.

“Die kragtige towerspreuk wat ek vyftien jaar gelede uitgespreek het, sorg dat Harry beskerm word terwyl hierdie huis sy tuiste is. Al was hy hoe ongelukkig hier en hoe onwelkom en al het julle hom hoe sleg behandel, het julle hom nogtans, onwillig, hier laat aanbly. Hierdie towerkrag sal ten einde kom die oomblik dat Harry sewentien word, met ander woorde, die oomblik wanneer hy ’n man word. Ek vra net een ding, en dit is dat julle Harry sal toelaat om nog een keer na hierdie huis terug te kom voor sy sewentiende verjaardag, om te verseker dat hy tot dan beskerm sal word.”

Nie een van die Dursleys sê iets nie. Dudley frons effens asof hy nog probeer uitwerk wanneer hy mishandel is. Oom Vernon lyk of daar iets in sy keel vassteek en tant Petunia is rooi in die gesig.

“Wel, Harry ... dis tyd dat ons aanstalten maak,” sê Dumbledore uiteindelik terwyl hy opstaan en sy lang swart mantel glad stryk. “Tot ons mekaar weer ontmoet,” sê hy vir die Dursleys wat lyk asof daardie oomblik vir hulle part maar vir ewig kan wag, lig sy hoed en stap statig by die vertrek uit.

“Baai,” sê Harry haastig vir die Dursleys en volg Dumbledore wat intussen gaan staan het by Harry se trommel waarop Hedwig se kou staan.

“Ons wil nie nou al hiermee belas word nie,” sê hy en bring weer sy towerstaf te voorskyn. “Ek stuur hulle solank na Die Konynenes toe om daar vir ons te wag. Maar ek wil hê jy moet jou Onsigbaarheidsmantel saambring ... net vir ingeval.”

Harry sukkel om sy mantel uit die trommel te kry, want hy probeer keer dat Dumbledore sien wat ’n deurmekaarspul alles is. Hy stop dit in sy baadjie se binnesak, Dumbledore swaai sy towerstaf, en die trommel, kou en Hedwig verdwyn. Dumbledore swaai weer sy towerstaf; die voordeur gaan oop en voor hulle lê die koel, mistige donkerte.

“Nou ja, Harry; kom ons betree die nag en volg daardie wispelurige verleidster, avontuur.”

CHAPTER FOUR



HORACE SLUGHORN

Despite the fact that he had spent every waking moment of the past few days hoping desperately that Dumbledore would indeed come to fetch him, Harry felt distinctly awkward as they set off down Privet Drive together. He had never had a proper conversation with the headmaster outside of Hogwarts before; there was usually a desk between them. The memory of their last face-to-face encounter kept intruding too, and it rather heightened Harry's sense of embarrassment; he had shouted a lot on that occasion, not to mention done his best to smash several of Dumbledore's most prized possessions.

Dumbledore, however, seemed completely relaxed.

"Keep your wand at the ready, Harry," he said brightly.

“But I thought I’m not allowed to use magic outside school, sir?”

“If there is an attack,” said Dumbledore, “I give you permission to use any counterjinx or curse that might occur to you. However, I do not think you need worry about being attacked tonight.”

“Why not, sir?”

“You are with me,” said Dumbledore simply. “This will do, Harry.”

He came to an abrupt halt at the end of Privet Drive.

“You have not, of course, passed your Apparition Test,” he said.

“No,” said Harry. “I thought you had to be seventeen?”

“You do,” said Dumbledore. “So you will need to hold on to my arm very tightly. My left, if you don’t mind — as you have noticed, my wand arm is a little fragile at the moment.”

Harry gripped Dumbledore’s proffered forearm.

“Very good,” said Dumbledore. “Well, here we go.”

Harry felt Dumbledore’s arm twist away from him and redoubled his grip; the next thing he knew, everything went black; he was being pressed very hard from all directions; he could not breathe, there were iron bands tightening around his chest; his eyeballs were being forced back into his head; his eardrums were being pushed deeper into his skull and then —”

He gulped great lungfuls of cold night air and opened his streaming eyes. He felt as though he had just been forced through a very tight rubber tube. It was a few seconds before he realized that Privet Drive had vanished. He and Dumbledore were now standing in what appeared to be a deserted village square, in the center of which stood an old war memorial and a few benches. His comprehension catching

up with his senses, Harry realized that he had just Apparated for the first time in his life.

“Are you all right?” asked Dumbledore, looking down at him solicitously. “The sensation does take some getting used to.”

“I’m fine,” said Harry, rubbing his ears, which felt as though they had left Privet Drive rather reluctantly. “But I think I might prefer brooms. . . .”

Dumbledore smiled, drew his traveling cloak a little more tightly around his neck, and said, “This way.”

He set off at a brisk pace, past an empty inn and a few houses. According to a clock on a nearby church, it was almost midnight.

“So tell me, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “Your scar . . . has it been hurting at all?”

Harry raised a hand unconsciously to his forehead and rubbed the lightning-shaped mark.

“No,” he said, “and I’ve been wondering about that. I thought it would be burning all the time now Voldemort’s getting so powerful again.”

He glanced up at Dumbledore and saw that he was wearing a satisfied expression.

“I, on the other hand, thought otherwise,” said Dumbledore. “Lord Voldemort has finally realized the dangerous access to his thoughts and feelings you have been enjoying. It appears that he is now employing Occlumency against you.”

“Well, I’m not complaining,” said Harry, who missed neither the disturbing dreams nor the startling flashes of insight into Voldemort’s mind.

They turned a corner, passing a telephone box and a bus shelter. Harry looked sideways at Dumbledore again. “Professor?”

“Harry?”

“Er — where exactly are we?”

“This, Harry, is the charming village of Budleigh Babberton.”

“And what are we doing here?”

“Ah yes, of course, I haven’t told you,” said Dumbledore. “Well, I have lost count of the number of times I have said this in recent years, but we are, once again, one member of staff short. We are here to persuade an old colleague of mine to come out of retirement and return to Hogwarts.”

“How can I help with that, sir?”

“Oh, I think we’ll find a use for you,” said Dumbledore vaguely. “Left here, Harry.”

They proceeded up a steep, narrow street lined with houses. All the windows were dark. The odd chill that had lain over Privet Drive for two weeks persisted here too. Thinking of dementors, Harry cast a look over his shoulder and grasped his wand reassuringly in his pocket.

“Professor, why couldn’t we just Apparate directly into your old colleague’s house?”

“Because it would be quite as rude as kicking down the front door,” said Dumbledore. “Courtesy dictates that we offer fellow wizards the opportunity of denying us entry. In any case, most Wizarding dwellings are magically protected from unwanted Apparators. At Hogwarts, for instance —”

“— you can’t Apparate anywhere inside the buildings or grounds,”

said Harry quickly. "Hermione Granger told me."

"And she is quite right. We turn left again."

The church clock chimed midnight behind them. Harry wondered why Dumbledore did not consider it rude to call on his old colleague so late, but now that conversation had been established, he had more pressing questions to ask.

"Sir, I saw in the *Daily Prophet* that Fudge has been sacked. . . ."

"Correct," said Dumbledore, now turning up a steep side street. "He has been replaced, as I am sure you also saw, by Rufus Scrimgeour, who used to be Head of the Auror office."

"Is he . . . Do you think he's good?" asked Harry.

"An interesting question," said Dumbledore. "He is able, certainly. A more decisive and forceful personality than Cornelius."

"Yes, but I meant —"

"I know what you meant. Rufus is a man of action and, having fought Dark wizards for most of his working life, does not underestimate Lord Voldemort."

Harry waited, but Dumbledore did not say anything about the disagreement with Scrimgeour that the *Daily Prophet* had reported, and he did not have the nerve to pursue the subject, so he changed it. "And . . . sir . . . I saw about Madam Bones."

"Yes," said Dumbledore quietly. "A terrible loss. She was a great witch. Just up here, I think — ouch."

He had pointed with his injured hand.

"Professor, what happened to your — ?"

"I have no time to explain now," said Dumbledore. "It is a thrilling tale, I wish to do it justice."

He smiled at Harry, who understood that he was not being snubbed, and that he had permission to keep asking questions.

“Sir — I got a Ministry of Magic leaflet by owl, about security measures we should all take against the Death Eaters. . . .”

“Yes, I received one myself,” said Dumbledore, still smiling. “Did you find it useful?”

“Not really.”

“No, I thought not. You have not asked me, for instance, what is my favorite flavor of jam, to check that I am indeed Professor Dumbledore and not an impostor.”

“I didn’t . . .” Harry began, not entirely sure whether he was being reprimanded or not.

“For future reference, Harry, it is raspberry . . . although of course, if I were a Death Eater, I would have been sure to research my own jam preferences before impersonating myself.”

“Er . . . right,” said Harry. “Well, on that leaflet, it said something about Inferi. What exactly are they? The leaflet wasn’t very clear.”

“They are corpses,” said Dumbledore calmly. “Dead bodies that have been bewitched to do a Dark wizard’s bidding. Inferi have not been seen for a long time, however, not since Voldemort was last powerful. . . . He killed enough people to make an army of them, of course. This is the place, Harry, just here. . . .”

They were nearing a small, neat stone house set in its own garden. Harry was too busy digesting the horrible idea of Inferi to have much attention left for anything else, but as they reached the front gate, Dumbledore stopped dead and Harry walked into him.

“Oh dear. Oh dear, dear, dear.”

Harry followed his gaze up the carefully tended front path and felt his heart sink. The front door was hanging off its hinges.

Dumbledore glanced up and down the street. It seemed quite deserted.

“Wand out and follow me, Harry,” he said quietly.

He opened the gate and walked swiftly and silently up the garden path, Harry at his heels, then pushed the front door very slowly, his wand raised and at the ready.

“Lumos.”

Dumbledore’s wand-tip ignited, casting its light up a narrow hallway. To the left, another door stood open. Holding his illuminated wand aloft, Dumbledore walked into the sitting room with Harry right behind him.

A scene of total devastation met their eyes. A grandfather clock lay splintered at their feet, its face cracked, its pendulum lying a little farther away like a dropped sword. A piano was on its side, its keys strewn across the floor. The wreckage of a fallen chandelier glittered nearby. Cushions lay deflated, feathers oozing from slashes in their sides; fragments of glass and china lay like powder over everything. Dumbledore raised his wand even higher, so that its light was thrown upon the walls, where something darkly red and glutinous was spattered over the wallpaper. Harry’s small intake of breath made Dumbledore look around.

“Not pretty, is it?” he said heavily. “Yes, something horrible has happened here.”

Dumbledore moved carefully into the middle of the room, scrutinizing the wreckage at his feet. Harry followed, gazing around,

half-scared of what he might see hidden behind the wreck of the piano or the overturned sofa, but there was no sign of a body.

“Maybe there was a fight and — and they dragged him off, Professor?” Harry suggested, trying not to imagine how badly wounded a man would have to be to leave those stains spattered halfway up the walls.

“I don’t think so,” said Dumbledore quietly, peering behind an overstuffed armchair lying on its side.

“You mean he’s — ?”

“Still here somewhere? Yes.”

And without warning, Dumbledore swooped, plunging the tip of his wand into the seat of the overstuffed armchair, which yelled, “Ouch!”

“Good evening, Horace,” said Dumbledore, straightening up again.

Harry’s jaw dropped. Where a split second before there had been an armchair, there now crouched an enormously fat, bald, old man who was massaging his lower belly and squinting up at Dumbledore with an aggrieved and watery eye.

“There was no need to stick the wand in that hard,” he said gruffly, clambering to his feet. “It hurt.”

The wandlight sparkled on his shiny pate, his prominent eyes, his enormous, silver, walruslike mustache, and the highly polished buttons on the maroon velvet jacket he was wearing over a pair of lilac silk pajamas. The top of his head barely reached Dumbledore’s chin.

“What gave it away?” he grunted as he staggered to his feet, still rubbing his lower belly. He seemed remarkably unabashed for a man

who had just been discovered pretending to be an armchair.

“My dear Horace,” said Dumbledore, looking amused, “if the Death Eaters really had come to call, the Dark Mark would have been set over the house.”

The wizard clapped a pudgy hand to his vast forehead.

“The Dark Mark,” he muttered. “Knew there was something . . . ah well. Wouldn’t have had time anyway, I’d only just put the finishing touches to my upholstery when you entered the room.”

He heaved a great sigh that made the ends of his mustache flutter.

“Would you like my assistance clearing up?” asked Dumbledore politely.

“Please,” said the other.

They stood back to back, the tall thin wizard and the short round one, and waved their wands in one identical sweeping motion.

The furniture flew back to its original places; ornaments re-formed in midair, feathers zoomed into their cushions; torn books repaired themselves as they landed upon their shelves; oil lanterns soared onto side tables and reignited; a vast collection of splintered silver picture frames flew glittering across the room and alighted, whole and untarnished, upon a desk; rips, cracks, and holes healed everywhere, and the walls wiped themselves clean.

“What kind of blood was that, incidentally?” asked Dumbledore loudly over the chiming of the newly unsmashed grandfather clock.

“On the walls? Dragon,” shouted the wizard called Horace, as, with a deafening grinding and tinkling, the chandelier screwed itself back into the ceiling.

There was a final *plunk* from the piano, and silence.

“Yes, dragon,” repeated the wizard conversationally. “My last bottle, and prices are sky-high at the moment. Still, it might be reusable.”

He stumped over to a small crystal bottle standing on top of a sideboard and held it up to the light, examining the thick liquid within.

“Hmm. Bit dusty.”

He set the bottle back on the sideboard and sighed. It was then that his gaze fell upon Harry.

“Oho,” he said, his large round eyes flying to Harry’s forehead and the lightning-shaped scar it bore. “*Oho!*”

“This,” said Dumbledore, moving forward to make the introduction, “is Harry Potter. Harry, this is an old friend and colleague of mine, Horace Slughorn.”

Slughorn turned on Dumbledore, his expression shrewd. “So that’s how you thought you’d persuade me, is it? Well, the answer’s no, Albus.”

He pushed past Harry, his face turned resolutely away with the air of a man trying to resist temptation.

“I suppose we can have a drink, at least?” asked Dumbledore. “For old time’s sake?”

Slughorn hesitated.

“All right then, one drink,” he said ungraciously.

Dumbledore smiled at Harry and directed him toward a chair not unlike the one that Slughorn had so recently impersonated, which stood right beside the newly burning fire and a brightly glowing oil lamp. Harry took the seat with the distinct impression that

Dumbledore, for some reason, wanted to keep him as visible as possible. Certainly when Slughorn, who had been busy with decanters and glasses, turned to face the room again, his eyes fell immediately upon Harry.

“Hmpf,” he said, looking away quickly as though frightened of hurting his eyes. “Here —” He gave a drink to Dumbledore, who had sat down without invitation, thrust the tray at Harry, and then sank into the cushions of the repaired sofa and a disgruntled silence. His legs were so short they did not touch the floor.

“Well, how have you been keeping, Horace?” Dumbledore asked.

“Not so well,” said Slughorn at once. “Weak chest. Wheezy. Rheumatism too. Can’t move like I used to. Well, that’s to be expected. Old age. Fatigue.”

“And yet you must have moved fairly quickly to prepare such a welcome for us at such short notice,” said Dumbledore. “You can’t have had more than three minutes’ warning?”

Slughorn said, half irritably, half proudly, “Two. Didn’t hear my Intruder Charm go off, I was taking a bath. Still,” he added sternly, seeming to pull himself back together again, “the fact remains that I’m an old man, Albus. A tired old man who’s earned the right to a quiet life and a few creature comforts.”

He certainly had those, thought Harry, looking around the room. It was stuffy and cluttered, yet nobody could say it was uncomfortable; there were soft chairs and footstools, drinks and books, boxes of chocolates and plump cushions. If Harry had not known who lived there, he would have guessed at a rich, fussy old lady.

“You’re not yet as old as I am, Horace,” said Dumbledore.

“Well, maybe you ought to think about retirement yourself,” said Slughorn bluntly. His pale gooseberry eyes had found Dumbledore’s injured hand. “Reactions not what they were, I see.”

“You’re quite right,” said Dumbledore serenely, shaking back his sleeve to reveal the tips of those burned and blackened fingers; the sight of them made the back of Harry’s neck prickle unpleasantly. “I am undoubtedly slower than I was. But on the other hand . . .”

He shrugged and spread his hands wide, as though to say that age had its compensations, and Harry noticed a ring on his uninjured hand that he had never seen Dumbledore wear before: It was large, rather clumsily made of what looked like gold, and was set with a heavy black stone that had cracked down the middle. Slughorn’s eyes lingered for a moment on the ring too, and Harry saw a tiny frown momentarily crease his wide forehead.

“So, all these precautions against intruders, Horace . . . are they for the Death Eaters’ benefit, or mine?” asked Dumbledore.

“What would the Death Eaters want with a poor broken-down old buffer like me?” demanded Slughorn.

“I imagine that they would want you to turn your considerable talents to coercion, torture, and murder,” said Dumbledore. “Are you really telling me that they haven’t come recruiting yet?”

Slughorn eyed Dumbledore balefully for a moment, then muttered, “I haven’t given them the chance. I’ve been on the move for a year. Never stay in one place more than a week. Move from Muggle house to Muggle house — the owners of this place are on holiday in the Canary Islands — it’s been very pleasant, I’ll be sorry to leave. It’s quite easy once you know how, one simple Freezing Charm on these

absurd burglar alarms they use instead of Sneakoscopes and make sure the neighbors don't spot you bringing in the piano."

"Ingenious," said Dumbledore. "But it sounds a rather tiring existence for a broken-down old buffer in search of a quiet life. Now, if you were to return to Hogwarts —"

"If you're going to tell me my life would be more peaceful at that pestilential school, you can save your breath, Albus! I might have been in hiding, but some funny rumors have reached me since Dolores Umbridge left! If that's how you treat teachers these days —"

"Professor Umbridge ran afoul of our centaur herd," said Dumbledore. "I think you, Horace, would have known better than to stride into the forest and call a horde of angry centaurs 'filthy half-breeds.'"

"That's what she did, did she?" said Slughorn. "Idiotic woman. Never liked her."

Harry chuckled and both Dumbledore and Slughorn looked round at him.

"Sorry," Harry said hastily. "It's just — I didn't like her either."

Dumbledore stood up rather suddenly.

"Are you leaving?" asked Slughorn at once, looking hopeful.

"No, I was wondering whether I might use your bathroom," said Dumbledore.

"Oh," said Slughorn, clearly disappointed. "Second on the left down the hall."

Dumbledore strode from the room. Once the door had closed behind him, there was silence. After a few moments, Slughorn got to

his feet but seemed uncertain what to do with himself. He shot a furtive look at Harry, then crossed to the fire and turned his back on it, warming his wide behind.

“Don’t think I don’t know why he’s brought you,” he said abruptly.

Harry merely looked at Slughorn. Slughorn’s watery eyes slid over Harry’s scar, this time taking in the rest of his face.

“You look very like your father.”

“Yeah, I’ve been told,” said Harry.

“Except for your eyes. You’ve got —”

“My mother’s eyes, yeah.” Harry had heard it so often he found it a bit wearing.

“Hmpf. Yes, well. You shouldn’t have favorites as a teacher, of course, but she was one of mine. Your mother,” Slughorn added, in answer to Harry’s questioning look. “Lily Evans. One of the brightest I ever taught. Vivacious, you know. Charming girl. I used to tell her she ought to have been in my House. Very cheeky answers I used to get back too.”

“Which was your House?”

“I was Head of Slytherin,” said Slughorn. “Oh, now,” he went on quickly, seeing the expression on Harry’s face and wagging a stubby finger at him, “don’t go holding that against me! You’ll be Gryffindor like her, I suppose? Yes, it usually goes in families. Not always, though. Ever heard of Sirius Black? You must have done — been in the papers for the last couple of years — died a few weeks ago —”

It was as though an invisible hand had twisted Harry’s intestines and held them tight.

“Well, anyway, he was a big pal of your father’s at school. The

whole Black family had been in my House, but Sirius ended up in Gryffindor! Shame — he was a talented boy. I got his brother, Regulus, when he came along, but I'd have liked the set."

He sounded like an enthusiastic collector who had been outbid at auction. Apparently lost in memories, he gazed at the opposite wall, turning idly on the spot to ensure an even heat on his backside.

"Your mother was Muggle-born, of course. Couldn't believe it when I found out. Thought she must have been pure-blood, she was so good."

"One of my best friends is Muggle-born," said Harry, "and she's the best in our year."

"Funny how that sometimes happens, isn't it?" said Slughorn.

"Not really," said Harry coldly.

Slughorn looked down at him in surprise. "You mustn't think I'm prejudiced!" he said. "No, no, no! Haven't I just said your mother was one of my all-time favorite students? And there was Dirk Cresswell in the year after her too — now Head of the Goblin Liaison Office, of course — another Muggle-born, a very gifted student, and still gives me excellent inside information on the goings-on at Gringotts!"

He bounced up and down a little, smiling in a self-satisfied way, and pointed at the many glittering photograph frames on the dresser, each peopled with tiny moving occupants.

"All ex-students, all signed. You'll notice Barnabas Cuffe, editor of the *Daily Prophet*, he's always interested to hear my take on the day's news. And Ambrosius Flume, of Honeydukes — a hamper every birthday, and all because I was able to give him an introduction

to Ciceron Harkiss, who gave him his first job! And at the back — you'll see her if you just crane your neck — that's Gwenog Jones, who of course captains the Holyhead Harpies. . . . People are always astonished to hear I'm on first-name terms with the Harpies, and free tickets whenever I want them!"

This thought seemed to cheer him up enormously.

"And all these people know where to find you, to send you stuff?" asked Harry, who could not help wondering why the Death Eaters had not yet tracked down Slughorn if hampers of sweets, Quidditch tickets, and visitors craving his advice and opinions could find him.

The smile slid from Slughorn's face as quickly as the blood from his walls.

"Of course not," he said, looking down at Harry. "I have been out of touch with everybody for a year."

Harry had the impression that the words shocked Slughorn himself; he looked quite unsettled for a moment. Then he shrugged.

"Still . . . the prudent wizard keeps his head down in such times. All very well for Dumbledore to talk, but taking up a post at Hogwarts just now would be tantamount to declaring my public allegiance to the Order of the Phoenix! And while I'm sure they're very admirable and brave and all the rest of it, I don't personally fancy the mortality rate —"

"You don't have to join the Order to teach at Hogwarts," said Harry, who could not quite keep a note of derision out of his voice: It was hard to sympathize with Slughorn's cosseted existence when he remembered Sirius, crouching in a cave and living on rats. "Most of the teachers aren't in it, and none of them has ever been killed —"

well, unless you count Quirrell, and he got what he deserved seeing as he was working with Voldemort.”

Harry had been sure Slughorn would be one of those wizards who could not bear to hear Voldemort’s name spoken aloud, and was not disappointed: Slughorn gave a shudder and a squawk of protest, which Harry ignored.

“I reckon the staff are safer than most people while Dumbledore’s headmaster; he’s supposed to be the only one Voldemort ever feared, isn’t he?” Harry went on.

Slughorn gazed into space for a moment or two: He seemed to be thinking over Harry’s words.

“Well, yes, it is true that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has never sought a fight with Dumbledore,” he muttered grudgingly. “And I suppose one could argue that as I have not joined the Death Eaters, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named can hardly count me a friend . . . in which case, I might well be safer a little closer to Albus. . . . I cannot pretend that Amelia Bones’s death did not shake me. . . . If she, with all her Ministry contacts and protection . . .”

Dumbledore reentered the room and Slughorn jumped as though he had forgotten he was in the house.

“Oh, there you are, Albus,” he said. “You’ve been a very long time. Upset stomach?”

“No, I was merely reading the Muggle magazines,” said Dumbledore. “I do love knitting patterns. Well, Harry, we have trespassed upon Horace’s hospitality quite long enough; I think it is time for us to leave.”

Not at all reluctant to obey, Harry jumped to his feet. Slughorn

seemed taken aback.

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes, indeed. I think I know a lost cause when I see one.”

“Lost . . . ?”

Slughorn seemed agitated. He twiddled his fat thumbs and fidgeted as he watched Dumbledore fasten his traveling cloak, and Harry zip up his jacket.

“Well, I’m sorry you don’t want the job, Horace,” said Dumbledore, raising his uninjured hand in a farewell salute. “Hogwarts would have been glad to see you back again. Our greatly increased security notwithstanding, you will always be welcome to visit, should you wish to.”

“Yes . . . well . . . very gracious . . . as I say . . .”

“Good-bye, then.”

“Bye,” said Harry.

They were at the front door when there was a shout from behind them.

“All right, all right, I’ll do it!”

Dumbledore turned to see Slughorn standing breathless in the doorway to the sitting room.

“You will come out of retirement?”

“Yes, yes,” said Slughorn impatiently. “I must be mad, but yes.”

“Wonderful,” said Dumbledore, beaming. “Then, Horace, we shall see you on the first of September.”

“Yes, I daresay you will,” grunted Slughorn.

As they set off down the garden path, Slughorn’s voice floated

after them, “I’ll want a pay rise, Dumbledore!”

Dumbledore chuckled. The garden gate swung shut behind them, and they set off back down the hill through the dark and the swirling mist.

“Well done, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

“I didn’t do anything,” said Harry in surprise.

“Oh yes you did. You showed Horace exactly how much he stands to gain by returning to Hogwarts. Did you like him?”

“Er . . .”

Harry wasn’t sure whether he liked Slughorn or not. He supposed he had been pleasant in his way, but he had also seemed vain and, whatever he said to the contrary, much too surprised that a Muggle-born should make a good witch.

“Horace,” said Dumbledore, relieving Harry of the responsibility to say any of this, “likes his comfort. He also likes the company of the famous, the successful, and the powerful. He enjoys the feeling that he influences these people. He has never wanted to occupy the throne himself; he prefers the backseat — more room to spread out, you see. He used to handpick favorites at Hogwarts, sometimes for their ambition or their brains, sometimes for their charm or their talent, and he had an uncanny knack for choosing those who would go on to become outstanding in their various fields. Horace formed a kind of club of his favorites with himself at the center, making introductions, forging useful contacts between members, and always reaping some kind of benefit in return, whether a free box of his favorite crystalized pineapple or the chance to recommend the next junior member of the Goblin Liaison Office.”

Harry had a sudden and vivid mental image of a great swollen spider, spinning a web around it, twitching a thread here and there to bring its large and juicy flies a little closer.

“I tell you all this,” Dumbledore continued, “not to turn you against Horace — or, as we must now call him, Professor Slughorn — but to put you on your guard. He will undoubtedly try to collect you, Harry. You would be the jewel of his collection; ‘the Boy Who Lived’ . . . or, as they call you these days, ‘the Chosen One.’”

At these words, a chill that had nothing to do with the surrounding mist stole over Harry. He was reminded of words he had heard a few weeks ago, words that had a horrible and particular meaning to him: *Neither can live while the other survives* . . .

Dumbledore had stopped walking, level with the church they had passed earlier.

“This will do, Harry. If you will grasp my arm.”

Braced this time, Harry was ready for the Apparition, but still found it unpleasant. When the pressure disappeared and he found himself able to breathe again, he was standing in a country lane beside Dumbledore and looking ahead to the crooked silhouette of his second favorite building in the world: the Burrow. In spite of the feeling of dread that had just swept through him, his spirits could not help but lift at the sight of it. Ron was in there . . . and so was Mrs. Weasley, who could cook better than anyone he knew. . . .

“If you don’t mind, Harry,” said Dumbledore, as they passed through the gate, “I’d like a few words with you before we part. In private. Perhaps in here?”

Dumbledore pointed toward a run-down stone outhouse where the

Weasleys kept their broomsticks. A little puzzled, Harry followed Dumbledore through the creaking door into a space a little smaller than the average cupboard. Dumbledore illuminated the tip of his wand, so that it glowed like a torch, and smiled down at Harry.

“I hope you will forgive me for mentioning it, Harry, but I am pleased and a little proud at how well you seem to be coping after everything that happened at the Ministry. Permit me to say that I think Sirius would have been proud of you.”

Harry swallowed; his voice seemed to have deserted him. He did not think he could stand to discuss Sirius; it had been painful enough to hear Uncle Vernon say “His godfather’s dead?” and even worse to hear Sirius’s name thrown out casually by Slughorn.

“It was cruel,” said Dumbledore softly, “that you and Sirius had such a short time together. A brutal ending to what should have been a long and happy relationship.”

Harry nodded, his eyes fixed resolutely on the spider now climbing Dumbledore’s hat. He could tell that Dumbledore understood, that he might even suspect that until his letter arrived, Harry had spent nearly all his time at the Dursleys’ lying on his bed, refusing meals, and staring at the misted window, full of the chill emptiness that he had come to associate with dementors.

“It’s just hard,” Harry said finally, in a low voice, “to realize he won’t write to me again.”

His eyes burned suddenly and he blinked. He felt stupid for admitting it, but the fact that he had had someone outside Hogwarts who cared what happened to him, almost like a parent, had been one of the best things about discovering his godfather . . . and now the

post owls would never bring him that comfort again. . . .

“Sirius represented much to you that you had never known before,” said Dumbledore gently. “Naturally, the loss is devastating. . . .”

“But while I was at the Dursleys’ . . .” interrupted Harry, his voice growing stronger, “I realized I can’t shut myself away or — or crack up. Sirius wouldn’t have wanted that, would he? And anyway, life’s too short. . . . Look at Madam Bones, look at Emmeline Vance. . . . It could be me next, couldn’t it? But if it is,” he said fiercely, now looking straight into Dumbledore’s blue eyes gleaming in the wandlight, “I’ll make sure I take as many Death Eaters with me as I can, and Voldemort too if I can manage it.”

“Spoken both like your mother and father’s son and Sirius’s true godson!” said Dumbledore, with an approving pat on Harry’s back. “I take my hat off to you — or I would, if I were not afraid of showering you in spiders.

“And now, Harry, on a closely related subject . . . I gather that you have been taking the *Daily Prophet* over the last two weeks?”

“Yes,” said Harry, and his heart beat a little faster.

“Then you will have seen that there have been not so much leaks as floods concerning your adventure in the Hall of Prophecy?”

“Yes,” said Harry again. “And now everyone knows that I’m the one —”

“No, they do not,” interrupted Dumbledore. “There are only two people in the whole world who know the full contents of the prophecy made about you and Lord Voldemort, and they are both standing in this smelly, spidery broom shed. It is true, however, that many have guessed, correctly, that Voldemort sent his Death Eaters to

steal a prophecy, and that the prophecy concerned you.

“Now, I think I am correct in saying that you have not told anybody that you know what the prophecy said?”

“No,” said Harry.

“A wise decision, on the whole,” said Dumbledore. “Although I think you ought to relax it in favor of your friends, Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger. Yes,” he continued, when Harry looked startled, “I think they ought to know. You do them a disservice by not confiding something this important to them.”

“I didn’t want —”

“— to worry or frighten them?” said Dumbledore, surveying Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles. “Or perhaps, to confess that you yourself are worried and frightened? You need your friends, Harry. As you so rightly said, Sirius would not have wanted you to shut yourself away.”

Harry said nothing, but Dumbledore did not seem to require an answer. He continued, “On a different, though related, subject, it is my wish that you take private lessons with me this year.”

“Private — with you?” said Harry, surprised out of his preoccupied silence.

“Yes. I think it is time that I took a greater hand in your education.”

“What will you be teaching me, sir?”

“Oh, a little of this, a little of that,” said Dumbledore airily.

Harry waited hopefully, but Dumbledore did not elaborate, so he asked something else that had been bothering him slightly.

“If I’m having lessons with you, I won’t have to do Occlumency lessons with Snape, will I?”

“Professor Snape, Harry — and no, you will not.”

“Good,” said Harry in relief, *“because they were a —”*

He stopped, careful not to say what he really thought.

“I think the word ‘fiasco’ would be a good one here,” said Dumbledore, nodding.

Harry laughed.

“Well, that means I won’t see much of Professor Snape from now on,” he said, *“because he won’t let me carry on Potions unless I get ‘Outstanding’ in my O.W.L., which I know I haven’t.”*

“Don’t count your owls before they are delivered,” said Dumbledore gravely. *“Which, now I think of it, ought to be some time later today. Now, two more things, Harry, before we part.*

“Firstly, I wish you to keep your Invisibility Cloak with you at all times from this moment onward. Even within Hogwarts itself. Just in case, you understand me?”

Harry nodded.

“And lastly, while you stay here, the Burrow has been given the highest security the Ministry of Magic can provide. These measures have caused a certain amount of inconvenience to Arthur and Molly — all their post, for instance, is being searched at the Ministry before being sent on. They do not mind in the slightest, for their only concern is your safety. However, it would be poor repayment if you risked your neck while staying with them.”

“I understand,” said Harry quickly.

“Very well, then,” said Dumbledore, pushing open the broom shed door and stepping out into the yard. *“I see a light in the kitchen. Let us not deprive Molly any longer of the chance to deplore how thin*

you are.”

Horace Slughorn

Ondanks die feit dat hy elke oomblik wat hy die afgelope paar dae wakker was, desperaat gehoop het Dumbledore gaan hom kom haal, voel dit vir Harry baie vreemd toe hulle saam in Ligusterlaan af stap. Hy het nog nooit buitekant Hogwarts 'n ordentlike gesprek met sy skoolhoof gevoer nie; daar was gewoonlik 'n lessenaar tussen hulle. Die gedagte aan die laaste keer toe hulle mekaar onder vier oë gesien het, bly by hom opkom en dit laat Harry nog ongemakliker voel; hy het by daardie geleentheid vreeslik gegil en geskree, om nie te praat van die feit dat hy sy bes gedoen het om 'n hele paar van Dumbledore se kosbaarste besittings te breek nie.

Dumbledore, aan die ander kant, lyk heeltemal ontspanne.

“Hou jou towerstaf gereed, Harry,” sê hy opgewek.

“Maar ek dog ek mag nie buite die skool towerkrag gebruik nie, professor?”

“As ons aangeval word,” sê Dumbledore, “gee ek jou toestemming om enige teenvloek waaraan jy kan dink, te gebruik. Maar ek dink nie jy hoef jou vanaand oor so iets te kwel nie.”

“Hoekom nie, professor?”

“Jy is by my,” sê Dumbledore eenvoudig. “Dis ver genoeg, Harry.” Hy steek in sy vier spore vas aan die einde van Ligusterlaan.

“Jy het natuurlik nog jou Appareertoets geslaag nie,” sê hy.

“Nee,” sê Harry. “Ek dog 'n mens moet sewentien wees?”

“Jy moet,” sê Dumbledore. “Dus sal jy baie styf aan my arm moet vashou. My linkerarm, as jy nie omgee nie – soos jy opgemerk het, is my towerstafarm op die oomblik ietwat broos.”

Harry gryp die voorarm vas wat Dumbledore hom aanbied.

“Mooi so,” sê Dumbledore. “Nou ja, hier gaan ons.”

Harry voel Dumbledore se arm van hom af wegdraai en vat dit stewiger vas. Skielik word alles pikswart en dit is asof hy van alle kante af vasgedruk word; hy kry nie asem nie; daar is ysterklampe wat al stywer om sy bors klem; sy oogballe word al verder terug in sy kop gedruk; sy oortrommels word al dieper in sy skedel gedruk, en toe –

Hy sluk groot teue van die koue naglug en maak sy betraande oë oop. Dit voel of hy nou net deur 'n baie nou rubberbuis geforseer is. Dit neem 'n paar sekondes voor hy besef Ligusterlaan het verdwyn. Hy en Dumbledore staan nou op 'n plek wat soos 'n verlate dorpsplein lyk, met 'n ou oorlogsgedenkteken in die middel en 'n paar bankies. Harry se verstand haal sy sintuie in en hy besef hy het so pas vir die eerste keer in sy lewe geappareer.

“Alles in die haak?” vra Dumbledore en kyk besorg na hom. “Dit neem 'n rukkie om gewoon te raak aan die sensasie.”

“Ek's oukei,” sê Harry en vryf sy ore wat voel of hulle taamlik onwillig uit Ligusterlaan weg is. “Maar ek dink ek sou besems verkies het.”

Dumbledore glimlag, trek sy reismantel nog 'n bietjie stywer om sy nek en sê: “Hierlangs.”

Hy stap flink weg, verby 'n leë herberg en 'n paar huise. Volgens die nabygeleë kerk se horlosie is dit amper middernag.

“Nou sê vir my, Harry,” sê Dumbledore. “Jou letsel ... was dit al weer enigins seer?”

Harry se hand gaan onbewus na sy voorkop toe en vryf oor die merk wat soos 'n weerligstraal lyk.

“Nee,” sê hy, “en dit het my laat wonder. Ek het gedink dit sal die hele tyd brand noudat Voldemort weer so magtig word.”

Hy loer sydelings vir Dumbledore en sien 'n tevrede uitdrukking op sy gesig.

“Ek, aan die ander kant, het weer andersom gedink,” sê Dumbledore. “Die Heer Voldemort het uiteindelik besef jy het toegang tot sy gedagtes en gevoelens en dat dit vir hom groot gevaar inhou. Daarom span hy nou Okklumensie teen jou in.”

“Wel, ek kla nie,” sê Harry wat die nare drome en ontstellende oomblikke van insae in Voldemort se gedagtes glad nie mis nie.

Hulle loop om 'n hoek, verby 'n telefoonhokkie en busskuiling. Harry loer weer onderlangs na Dumbledore.

“Professor?”

“Harry?”

“E – waar presies is ons?”

“Hierdie plek, Harry, is die sjarmante dorpie Budleigh Babberton.”

“En wat doen ons hier?”

“O ja, natuurlik, ek het jou nog nie gesê nie,” antwoord Dumbledore. “Wel, ek weet nie meer hoeveel keer ek dit al die afgelope jare gesê het nie, maar ons kom weer eens 'n personeellid kort. Ons is hier om 'n afgetrede kollega van my te oorreed om na Hogwarts terug te keer.”

Hoe kan ek daarmee help, professor?"

"O, ek dink ons sal wel 'n nut vir jou vind," sê Dumbledore vaag. "Hier links, Harry."

Hulle beland in 'n steil, nou straatjie met huise aan albei kante. Al die vensters is donker. Harry voel hier ook die vreemde koue wat nou al twee weke lank oor Ligusterlaan hang. Hy dink aan die Dementors, kyk oor sy skouer en gryp na die towerstaf in sy sak om homself gerus te stel.

"Professor, hoekom kon ons nie net direk in u ou kollega se huis geappareer het nie?"

"Want dit sal so ongemanierd wees soos om die voordeur oop te skop," sê Dumbledore. "Hoflikheid vereis dat ons medetowenaars die geleentheid bied om ons toegang te weier. In elk geval, die meeste towenaarshuise word deur towerspreuke teen ongewenste appareerders beskerm. By Hogwarts byvoorbeeld –"

"– kan jy nêrens binne die geboue of skoolgrond appareer nie," sê Harry haastig. "Hermione Granger het my vertel."

"En sy was heeltemal reg. Hier draai ons weer links."

Agter hulle slaan die kerkklok middernag. Harry wonder hoekom Dumbledore nie dink dit is ongemanierd om sy ou kollega so laat te besoek nie, maar noudat hulle begin gesels het, het hy belangriker vrae om te vra.

"Professor, ek het in die *Daaglikse Profeet* gelees dat Fudge in die pad gestee is ..."

"Korrek," sê Dumbledore en draai by 'n steil systraatjie in. "Hy is, soos jy sekerlik al gesien het, vervang deur Rufus Scrimgeour wat voorheen die Hoof van die Auror-kantoor was."

"Is hy ... dink u hy is sy sout werd?" vra Harry.

"Interessante vraag," sê Dumbledore. "Hy is beslis bevoeg. Hy neem makliker besluite en hy is sterker as Cornelius."

"Ja, maar ek het bedoel –"

"Ek weet wat jy bedoel het. Rufus is 'n man van aksie en aangesien hy bykans sy hele werkslewe lank Donker towenaars beveg, onderskat hy nie die Heer Voldemort nie."

Harry wag, maar Dumbledore sê niks van die meningsverskil met Scrimgeour waaroor die *Daaglikse Profeet* berig het nie, en hy het nie die moed om verder op die onderwerp in te gaan nie, dus verander hy dit.

"En ... professor ... Ek het gelees van Madame Bones."

"Ja," sê Dumbledore stil. "'n Vreeslike verlies. Sy was 'n heks van formaat. Net hier op, dink ek – au."

Hy het met sy beseerde hand beduie.

“Wat het gebeur met professor se – ?”

“Ek het nie nou tyd om te verduidelik nie,” sê Dumbledore. “Dit is ’n opwindende verhaal; ek wil graag reg daaraan laat geskied.”

Hy glimlag vir Harry wat verstaan dat hy nie afgejak word nie en nog vrae mag vra.

“Professor – ek het per uilepos ’n biljet van die Ministerie van Towerkuns gekry oor die veiligheidsmaatreëls wat ons almal teen die Doodseters moet tref ...”

“Ja, ek het self ook een gekry,” sê Dumbledore terwyl hy nog steeds glimlag. “Het jy dit nuttig gevind?”

“Nie regtig nie.”

“Nes ek gedink het. Want jy het nog nie vir my gevra wat byvoorbeeld my gunstelinggeur konfyt is nie – om seker te maak ek is inderdaad professor Dumbledore en nie ’n bedrieër nie.”

“Nee, ek het nie ...” Harry is nie heeltemal seker of hy nou te-reggewys word of nie.

“Vir toekomstige verwysing, Harry, dit is framboos ... hoewel ek, as ek ’n Doodseter was, natuurlik vooraf eers navorsing oor my eie konfytvoorkeure sou doen voor ek my as myself durf voordoen het.”

“E ... ja,” sê Harry. “Die biljet het iets van die Inferi gesê. Wat presies is hulle? Die biljet was nie baie duidelik daaroor nie.”

“Hulle is lyke,” sê Dumbledore kalm. “Dooie liggame wat getoor is om ’n Donker towenaar se bevele uit te voer. Daar is egter lanklaas Inferi opgemerk, nie sedert Voldemort so magtig was nie ... Hy het natuurlik genoeg mense doodgemaak om ’n hele leërmag van hulle te maak. Dis die plek daardie, Harry.”

Hulle nader ’n klein, netjiese huisie met sy eie tuin. Harry is te besig om die aaklige gedagte aan Inferi te verteer om veel in enigiets anders belang te stel en hy loop hom vas in Dumbledore wat skielik by die voorhekkie gaan staan het.

“O, land. O liewe, liewe, liewe land.”

Harry volg Dumbledore se oë al met die netjies versorgde voetpaadjie op en sy hart sink in sy skoene. Die voordeur hang los aan sy kosyne.

Dumbledore kyk op en af in die straat. Dit lyk totaal verlate.

“Towerstaf uit en volg my, Harry,” sê hy sag.

Hy maak die hekkie oop en loop vinnig en stil met die tuinpaadjie op, met Harry kort op sy hakke. Hy stoot die voordeur baie stadig oop en lig sy towerstaf, gereed vir aksie.

“*Lumos.*”

Die punt van Dumbledore se towerstaf begin gloei en gooi ’n

ligstraat oor die smal voorportaal. Links staan daar nog 'n deur oop. Dumbledore lig sy towerstaf om beter te sien en loop by die sitkamer in met Harry reg agter hom.

Voor hulle is 'n toneel van totale verwoesting. 'n Staanhorlosie lê stukkend by hul voete, sy gesig gekraak en sy slinger 'n entjie van hom af soos iemand wat 'n swaard laat val het. 'n Klavier lê op sy sy, sy klawers oor die vloer gestrooi. Langsaan lê die oorblyfsels van 'n kandelaar wat afgeval het. Kussings lê pap met vere wat uit die snye in hul sye peul; glas- en porseleinskerwe is soos poeier oor alles gestrooi. Dumbledore lig sy towerstaf nog hoër sodat die lig op die mure ook skyn. Iets donkerroois en klewerigs het oral oor die plakpapier gespat. Harry snak na asem en Dumbledore kyk om.

“Nie 'n mooi gesig nie,” sê hy swaar. “Hier het iets grusaams gebeur.”

Dumbledore beweeg versigtig na die middel van die vertrek, sy oë op die puin aan sy voete. Harry volg hom en kyk rond, half benoud oor wat hy dalk agter die stukkende klavier of die omgekeerde rusbank mag sien, maar daar is nêrens 'n teken van 'n liggaam nie.

“Miskien was hier 'n geveg en – en toe sleep hulle hom hier weg, professor?” stel Harry voor terwyl hy hard probeer om nie te dink aan hoe ernstig iemand beseer moet wees as daar sulke bloedspatsels teen die mure is nie.

“Ek dink nie so nie,” sê Dumbledore stil en loer agter 'n baie stewig gestoffeerde leunstoel wat omgegooi lê.

“U bedoel hy's – ?”

“Nog hier iewers? Ja.”

En sonder waarskuwing sak Dumbledore toe op die stewig gestoffeerde leunstoel. Hy druk sy towerstaf se punt hard in die sitplek tot die stoel gil: “Eina!”

“Goeienaand, Horace,” sê Dumbledore en kom regop.

Harry se mond val oop. Waar daar minder as 'n sekonde gelede nog 'n leunstoel gestaan het, hurk daar nou 'n yslike, vet, bles ou man wat die onderkant van sy maag vryf en met waterige, gekrenkte oë na Dumbledore opkyk.

“Was nie nodig om jou towerstaf so hard in te druk nie,” brom hy vies en sukkel om behoorlik op sy voete te kom. “Dit was seer.”

Die towerstaf se lig weerkaats op sy blink kop, sy prominente oë, sy reusagtige silwer hangsnor wat soos 'n walrus s'n lyk en die blinkgevryfde knope op die bruinrooi fluweelbaadjie wat hy bo-oor sy ligpers sypajamas dra. Die bokant van sy kop kom skaars by Dumbledore se ken.

“Wat het my verraai?” vra hy en vryf nog steeds die onderkant

van sy maag. Hy lyk verbasend onbeskaamd vir 'n man wat nou net uitgevang is toe hy probeer maak het of hy 'n leunstoel is.

"My liewe Horace," sê Dumbledore geamuseerd, "as die Doodseters regtig vir jou kom kuier het, sou die Donker Merk oor die huis gehang het."

Die towenaar klap sy breë voorkop met 'n pofferrige handjie.

"Die Donker Merk," mompel hy. "Ek het geweet daar's iets ... Ag, nou ja. Sou in elk geval nie tyd gehad het nie. Was net mooi klaar met die finale afrondingswerk aan my stoffering toe jy by die vertrek inkom."

Hy slaak 'n diep sug wat die punte van sy snor laat bewe.

"Moet ek hand bysit met die opruimwerk?" bied Dumbledore beleefd aan.

"Asseblief," sê die ander een.

Hulle staan rug aan rug, die lang, maer towenaar en die kort, ronde een, en swaai hul towerstawwe met 'n identiese swiepbeweging.

Die meubels vlieg terug na hul oorspronklike plekke; ornamente word weer heel in die lug; vere zoem terug in hul kussings; geskeurde boeke maak hulself reg soos wat hulle weer op hul rakke gaan staan; olielanterns sweef terug na sytafeltjies en gaan vanself weer aan; 'n ontsaglike versameling silwer portretrame vlieg glinsterend oor die vertrek en kom heel en ongeskonde op 'n tafel tot rus; skeure, krake en gate oral word weer heel; en die mure vee hulself skoon.

"Terloops, watter soort bloed was dit?" vra Dumbledore hard bo die oorverdowende geluid van die pas herstelde staanhorlosie se swaar slae.

"Teen die mure? Drakebloed," roep die towenaar genaamd Horace bo die geraas van die kandelaar wat homself met 'n oorverdowende geklingel en geknars aan die plafon vasskroef.

Die klavier gee 'n laaste *plonk* en dan is dit tjoepstil.

"Ja, drakebloed," herhaal die towenaar geselserig. "My laaste bottel, en die pryse is juis op die oomblik so belaglik hoog. Maar miskien kan ek dit weer gebruik."

Hy strompel na 'n klein kristalbottel wat op 'n buffet staan, hou dit op na die lig en bekyk die dik vloeistof daarin.

"Hm. Bietjie stowwerig."

Hy sit die bottel terug op die buffet en sug. Nou eers val sy blik op Harry.

"Oho," sê hy en sy groot ronde oë vlieg na die weerligstraalletsel op Harry se voorkop. "Oho!"

“Dit,” sê Dumbledore en tree vorentoe om hulle voor te stel, “is Harry Potter. Harry, dit is ’n ou vriend en kollega van my, Horace Slughorn.”

Die uitgeslape Slughorn draai na Dumbledore.

“Dan is dit hoe jy my wil oorreed, nè? Wel, die antwoord is nee, Albus.”

Hy draai sy gesig weg van Harry af soos ’n man wat vasberade is om ’n groot versoeking te weerstaan.

“Ek veronderstel ons kan darem ten minste iets saam drink?” vra Dumbledore. “Ter wille van die goeie ou dae?”

Slughorn huiwer.

“Nou goed dan, een drankie,” sê hy ongasvry.

Dumbledore glimlag en bestuur Harry na ’n stoel wat taamlik baie lyk soos die een wat Slughorn netnou nog nageboots het. Die stoel staan reg langsaaan die vuur wat nou weer lustig brand en die olielamp wat helder gloei. Harry gaan sit op die stoel en kry die idee dat Dumbledore hom om die een of ander rede so sigbaar moontlik wil hou. En inderdaad, toe Slughorn, wat met ’n kraffie en glase besig was, weer na die vertrek toe draai, val sy oë onmiddellik op Harry.

“Gmf,” sê hy en kyk vinnig weg asof hy bang is sy oë gaan seerkry. “Hier –” Hy gee ’n drankie vir Dumbledore wat intussen ongenooi gaan sit het, pomp Harry in die sy met die skinkbord en gaan sink dan knorrig in die reggemaakte rusbank se kussing weg. Hy sê nie ’n woord nie en sy bene is so kort dat hulle nie aan die grond raak nie.

“Wel, hoe gaan dit met jou, Horace?” vra Dumbledore.

“Nie te goed nie,” sê Slughorn dadelik. “Swak bors. Fluit aanhoudend. Vol rumatiek ook. Kan nie meer soos eers rondbeweeg nie. Maar mens moet dit te wagte wees. Ouderdom. Uitputting.”

“Jy moes nogtans taamlik vinnig beweeg het om op sulke kort kennisgewing vir ons só ’n verwelkoming te kon voorberei,” sê Dumbledore. “Jy kon nie meer as drie minute waarskuwing gehad het nie.”

“Twee,” sê Slughorn half geïrriteerd en half trots. “Was in die bad. Het nie my Indringer-paljas hoor afgaan nie. Ewenwel,” voeg hy streng by, en dit lyk of hy hom nou weer regruk, “feit bly staan – ek is ’n ou man, Albus. ’n Moeë ou man wat die reg op ’n stil bestaan en ’n paar geriefies verdien het.”

Hy het beslis ’n paar, dink Harry terwyl hy in die vertrek rondkyk. Dit is miskien benoud en oorvol, maar niemand kan sê dit is ongerieflik nie; daar is sagte stoele en voetbankies, drankies en boeke,

dose sjokolade en sagte kussings. As Harry nie geweet het wie hier bly nie, sou hy geraai het dit is 'n ryk, vitterige ou dame.

"Jy's nog nie so oud soos ek nie, Horace," sê Dumbledore.

"Wel, miskien moet jy self ook daaraan dink om af te tree," sê Slughorn bot. Sy bleek appelliefie-oë het Dumbledore se beseerde hand raak gesien. "Reaksies nie meer wat hulle was nie, sien ek."

"Jy's heeltemal reg," sê Dumbledore onverstoord en skud sy mou terug sodat hulle kan sien hoe swart sy vingerpunte verbrand is. Die hare in Harry se nek staan regop. "Ek is ongetwyfeld stadiger as wat ek was. Maar aan die ander kant ..."

Hy haal sy skouers op en rek sy hande wyd oop asof hy daarmee wil sê dat die ouderdom ook sy eie vergoeding meebring. Harry sien 'n ring aan Dumbledore se onbeseerde hand wat hy hom nog nooit voorheen sien dra het nie: dit is groot en nogal lomp gemaak van iets wat soos goud lyk en 'n swaar swart steen met 'n kraak in die middel is daarin geset. Slughorn se oë huiwer 'n oomblik op die ring en Harry sien hoe 'n vlugtige frons sy breë voorkop verkreukel.

"En al hierdie voorsorgmaatreëls teen indringers, Horace ... Is dit met die oog op die Doodseters, of op my?" vra Dumbledore.

"Wat sal die Doodseters tog nou met 'n oor-die-muur ou sukkelaar soos ek wil maak?" wil Slughorn weet.

"Ek veronderstel hulle sal jou wil oortuig om jou aansienlike talente in te span om mense af te pers, te martel en te vermoor," sê Dumbledore. "Moenie vir my sê hulle was nog nie hier om jou te probeer werf nie?"

Slughorn kyk Dumbledore amper treurig aan. "Ek het hulle nie kans gegee om dit te doen nie. Ek beweeg nou al 'n jaar lank rond. Bly nooit langer as 'n week op een plek nie. Trek van Moggel-huis na Moggel-huis – hierdie plek se eienaars hou vakansie op die Kanariese Eilande. Dit was baie lekker; ek sal spyt wees om hier weg te gaan. Dis nogal maklik as jy eers weet hoe: Net een Vriespaljas op hierdie absurde diefalarms wat hulle pleks van Loerskope gebruik, en verder moet jy seker maak die bure sien jou nie wanneer jy die klavier insmokkel nie."

"Vindingryk," sê Dumbledore. "Maar dit klink na 'n ietwat vermoeiende lewe vir 'n oor-die-muur ou sukkelaar op soek na 'n vreedsame bestaan. Jy weet, as jy terug Hogwarts toe kom –"

"As jy vir my gaan sê my lewe sal rustiger wees by daai verpestelike skool kan jy net sowel jou asem spaar, Albus! Ek mag dalk wegkruip, maar ek het 'n hele paar vreemde dinge te hore gekom sedert Dolores Umbridge daar weg is! As dit is hoe jy leerkragte deesdae behandel –"

“Professor Umbridge het haar ons kudde sentours se onguns op die hals gehaal,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek dink jy, Horace, sou van beter geweet het as om by die Woud in te stap en ’n horde ontstelde sentours ‘vieslike halfbloede’ te noem.”

“Is dit wat sy gedoen het?” vra Slughorn. “Simpel vroumens. Nooit van haar gehou nie.”

Harry grinnik en sowel Dumbledore as Slughorn kyk om na hom.

“Ekskuus,” sê Harry vinnig. “Dis net – ek het ook nie van haar gehou nie.”

Dumbledore staan onverwags op.

“Op pad?” vra Slughorn dadelik hoopvol.

“Nee. Mag ek asseblief jou badkamer gebruik?” vra Dumbledore.

“O,” sê Slughorn, duidelik teleurgesteld. “Tweede deur links af in die gang.”

Dumbledore verlaat die vertrek. Hy maak die deur agter hom toe en dan is dit stil. Ná ’n paar oomblikke kom Slughorn op sy voete, maar lyk onseker oor wat om met homself te doen. Hy kyk steels na Harry, loop dan na die kaggelvuur en draai sy rug soontoe om sy breë agterstewe warm te maak.

“Moenie dink ek weet nie hoekom hy jou saamgebring het nie,” sê hy skielik.

Harry staar Slughorn net aan. Slughorn se waterige oë gly oor Harry se litteken en neem hierdie keer die res van sy gesig ook in.

“Jy lyk baie soos jou pa.”

“Ja, mense het my al gesê,” antwoord Harry.

“Behalwe jou oë. Jy het –”

“My ma se oë, ja.” Harry het dit al tot vervelens toe gehoor.

“Hm, ja wel, ’n mens is natuurlik nie veronderstel om witbroodjies te hê as jy ’n onderwyser is nie, maar sy was een van my gunsteling. Jou ma,” voeg Slughorn by in antwoord op Harry se vraende kyk. “Lily Evans. Een van my knapste leerlinge ooit. Lewenslustig, weet jy. Sjarmante meisie. Ek het altyd vir haar gesê sy moes in my huis gewees het. En sy was altyd reg met ’n parmantige antwoord.”

“Watter een was u huis?”

“Ek was die Hoof van Slytherin,” sê Slughorn. “Toe nou,” sê hy vinnig toe hy die uitdrukking op Harry se gesig sien en wys vir hom vinger. “Moenie dit teen my hou nie! Ek veronderstel jy’s in Gryffindor, nes sy was? Ja, dit bly gewoonlik so in die familie. Maar nie altyd nie, hoor. Al ooit van Sirius Black gehoor? Jy moes al – hy was die laaste paar jaar pal in die koerant – hy’s ’n paar weke gelede dood –”

Dit is asof 'n onsigbare hand Harry se binnegoed draai en dit styf vashou.

“Wel, nietemin, hy en jou pa was groot maats op skool. Die hele Black-familie was in my huis, maar Sirius het in Gryffindor beland! Foeitog – hy was 'n begaafde seun. Ek het sy broer Regulus gekry toe hy later daar aankom, maar ek sou graag albei van hulle wou gehad het.”

Hy klink soos 'n ywerige versamelaar wie se bod nie goed genoeg was by 'n vendusie nie. Oënskynlik verlore in herinneringe staar hy na die oorkantse muur terwyl hy sy agterstewe stadig draai sodat dit oral ewe warm kan bly.

“Jou ma was natuurlik 'n Moggel van geboorte. Kon dit nie glo toe ek dit uitvind nie. Gedag sy moet 'n volbloed wees, oor sy so uitstekend was.”

“Een van my beste vriende is ook van Moggel-afkoms,” sê Harry “en sy's die beste student in ons jaar.”

“Snaaks hoe dit soms gebeur, nè?” sê Slughorn.

“Nie regtig nie,” sê Harry kil.

Slughorn kyk hom verbaas aan.

“Moenie dink ek is bevooroordeel nie!” sê hy. “Nee, nee, nee! Ek het mos nou net vir jou gesê jou ma was een van my grootste gunsteling oit. En dan was daar ook Dirk Creswell die jaar ná haar – hy's natuurlik nou Hoof van die Kabouter Skakelkantoor – nóg 'n gebore Moggel, 'n baie begaafde student wat nog steeds vir my uitstekende inligting gee oor wat agter die skerms by Gringotts aangaan!”

Hy gee 'n opgewonde huppel, glimlag selfvoldaan en beduie na die laaikas. Daar staan 'n hele klomp glinsterende fotorame wat deur klein bewegende figuurtjies bewoon word.

“Almal gewese studente, almal geteken. Kyk mooi, daar is Barnabas Cuffe, redakteur van die *Daaglikse Profeet* – hy wil altyd hoor wat ek van die nuus van die dag dink. En daar's Ambrose Flume, of Heuningbek – hy stuur elke jaar vir my 'n geskenkpakkie met my verjaardag, en dit net omdat ek hom voorgestel het aan Ciceron Harkiss, wat vir hom sy eerste werk gegee het! En daar agter – jy sal haar sien as jy jou nek rek – dis Gwenog Jones, wat natuurlik die kaptein van die Holyhead Harpies is ... Mense is altyd verstom om te hoor ek noem die Harpies op hul voorname en kan net wanneer ek wil gratis kaartjies kry!”

Dit lyk of die gedagte hieraan hom geweldig opbeur.

“En al hierdie mense weet waar om u in die hande te kry, waarheen om vir u goed te stuur?” vra Harry, wat nie kan help om te wonder hoekom die Doodseters Slughorn nog nie opgespoor het as

geskenkpakkies, Kwiddiek-kaartjies en besoekers wat smag na sy raad en mening by hom kan uitkom nie.

Die glimlag gly so vinnig van Slughorn se gesig af soos die bloed van sy mure.

“Natuurlik nie,” sê hy en kyk af na Harry. “Ek was die afgelope jaar nie met enigiemand in kontak nie.”

Dit lyk vir Harry of die woorde Slughorn skok. Hy lyk vir ’n oomblik uit die veld geslaan, maar dan haal hy sy skouers op.

“Nogtans ... ’n Wyse towenaar lê laag in sulke tye. Dumbledore kan maklik praat, maar om nou ’n pos by Hogwarts te aanvaar, is net so goed soos om in die openbaar aan te kondig dat ek die Orde van die Feniks steun! Ek is seker hulle is baie bewonderenswaardig en dapper en al daardie dinge, maar persoonlik vind ek hul sterftesyster ietwat hoog.”

“U hoef nie by die Orde aan te sluit om by Hogwarts skool te hou nie,” sê Harry, wat dit nie regkry om ’n spottende toon uit sy stem te hou nie. Dit is moeilik om simpatie te hê met Slughorn wat so ’n gemaklike lewe lei terwyl hy nog goed onthou hoe Sirius in ’n grot moes wegkruip en van rotte lewe. “Die meeste onderwysers behoort nie aan die Orde nie en nie een van hulle is nog ooit doodgemaak nie – behalwe Quirrel, maar dit was sy verdiende loon, want hy het saam met Voldemort gewerk.”

Harry was seker Slughorn is een van daardie towenaars wat dit nie kan verdra as Voldemort se naam hardop genoem word nie en hy word nie teleurgestel nie: Slughorn sidder en snak in protes, maar Harry ignoreer dit.

“Ek reken die personeel is veiliger as die meeste mense solank as wat Dumbledore die skoolhoof is. Hy is veronderstel om die enigste een te wees vir wie Voldemort ooit bang was, nie waar nie?” gaan Harry aan.

Slughorn staar vir ’n oomblik of twee die niet in; dit lyk of hy oor Harry se woorde nadink.

“Wel, ja, dit is waar dat Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie Dumbledore nog nooit die stryd aangesê het nie,” brom hy teen-sinnig. “En ek veronderstel ’n mens kan redeneer dat aangesien ek nie by die Doodseters aangesluit het nie, Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie my beswaarlik as ’n vriend sal ag ... in welke geval ek dalk inderdaad veiliger sal wees as ek effens nader aan Dumbledore is ... Ek kan nie ontken dat Amelia Bones se dood my geruk het nie ... As sy, met al die Ministerie se kontakte en beskerming ...”

Dumbledore kom weer by die vertrek in en Slughorn skrik asof hy vergeet het hy is in die huis.

“O, daar is jy, Albus,” sê hy. “Jy’t lank weggebly. Omgekrapte maag?”

“Nee, ek het net die Moggel-tydskrifte gelees,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek is dol op breipatrone. Wel, Harry, ons het nou lank genoeg misbruik gemaak van Slughorn se gasvryheid; ek dink dis tyd dat ons in die pad val.”

Harry is gretig om te gehoorsaam en spring orent. Slughorn lyk afgehaal.

“Gaan julle nou?”

“Ja, inderdaad. Ek dink ek ken ’n verlore saak as ek een sien.”

“Verlore ...?”

Slughorn lyk onthuts. Hy speel met sy vet duime en raak al hoe rusteloser terwyl hy kyk hoe Dumbledore sy reismantel vasmaak en Harry sy baadjie toerits.

“Wel, ek’s jammer jy wil nie die werk hê nie, Horace,” sê Dumbledore en lig sy onbeseerde hand in ’n groetgebaar. “Dit sou gaaf gewees het om jou weer by Hogwarts te kon hê. Ten spyte van ons verhoogde sekuriteitsmaatreëls is jy egter altyd welkom om te kom kuier, as jy sou wou.”

“Ja ... wel ... Dis vriendelik van jou ... Maar soos ek sê ...”

“Tot siens dan.”

“Baai,” sê Harry.

Hulle is al by die voordeur toe hulle die geroep agter hulle hoor.

“Goed dan, goed dan, ek sal dit doen!”

Dumbledore draai om en sien Slughorn uitasem in die sitkamer-deur staan.

“Gaan jy jou aftrede kortknip?”

“Ja, ja,” sê Slughorn ongeduldig. “Ek moet mal wees, maar ja.”

“Wonderlik,” sê Dumbledore stralend. “Dan sien ons jou op die eerste September, Horace.”

“Ja, ek veronderstel so,” snork Slughorn.

Terwyl hulle met die tuinpaadjie af loop, dryf Slughorn se stem agter hulle aan.

“Ek wil ’n salarisverhoging hê, Dumbledore!”

Dumbledore lag in sy baard. Die tuinhekkie swaai toe agter hulle en hulle stap weer by die heuwel af, deur die donker en die malende mis.

“Knap gedaan, Harry,” sê Dumbledore.

“Ek het niks gedoen nie,” sê Harry verbaas.

“O ja, jy het. Jy het vir Horace gewys presies hoeveel hy daarby kan baat as hy na Hogwarts terugkeer. Hou jy van hom?”

“E ...”

Harry is nie seker of hy van Slughorn hou of nie. Hy is miskien aangenaam op sy eie soort manier, maar hy lyk ook verwaand en, al sê hy hoeveel keer die teendeel, gans te verbaas dat 'n gebore Moggel 'n goeie heks kan wees.

“Horace,” sê Dumbledore en verlos Harry van die verantwoordelikheid om dit alles te sê, “hou van gemak. Hy hou ook van be-roemde, suksesvolle en invloedryke mense se geselskap. Hy hou daarvan om te dink hy kan hierdie mense beïnvloed. Hy wou nog nooit self op die troon sit nie; hy verkies die agterste sitplek – daar is mos meer plek om jou bene te rek. Hy het sy gunsteling by Hog-warts altyd met groot sorg uitgesoek; soms vir hul ambisie of hul breinkrag, soms vir hul sjarme of hul talent, en hy het die kuns verstaan om diegene te kies wat uiteindelik die hoogste sport op hul verskillende gebiede sou bereik. Horace se gunsteling het later 'n soort klub gevorm met hom as die spil waarom alles draai. Hy het die regte mense aan mekaar voorgestel en vriendskappe gesmee wat vir almal voordelig was, maar veral vir hom – sy belonings het gewissel van 'n boks van sy gunsteling versuikerde pynappels tot die geleentheid om aan te beveel wie die Kabouter Skakelkantoor se volgende junior lid moet wees.”

Harry sien skielik helder voor sy geestesoog die beeld van 'n groot opgeswelde spinnekop wat 'n web om hom spin en gedurig hier en daar aan 'n draadje pluk om sy sappige groot vlieë 'n bietjie nader aan hom te kry.

“Ek vertel jou nie van al hierdie dinge,” gaan Dumbledore aan, “om jou teen Horace – of professor Slughorn soos ons hom nou moet noem – op te steek nie, maar sodat jy op jou hoede sal wees. Jy sal die kroonjuweel in sy versameling wees: die Seun Wat Bly Lewe Het ... of, soos hulle jou deesdae noem, die Uitverkorene.”

Met die aanhoor van hierdie woorde word Harry yskoud, en nie as gevolg van die mis om hulle nie. Dit herinner hom aan die woorde wat hy 'n paar weke gelede gehoor het, woorde wat vir hom spesifiek 'n afgryslike betekenis het:

Nie een van die twee kan leef terwyl die ander een oorleef nie ...

Dumbledore gaan staan naby die kerk waar hulle vroeër verby-gestap het.

“Dis tyd, Harry. Hou asseblief aan my arm vas.”

Harry staal hom; hy is hierdie keer gereed vir die apparering, maar dit is nog steeds vir hom onaangenaam. Toe die druk minder word en hy weer kan asemhaal, staan hy langs Dumbledore op 'n grondpaadjie en kyk na die skewe silhoeët van die gebou waarvoor hy die tweede liefste in die wêreld is: Die Konynenes. Ondanks die

gevoel van afgryse wat hom so pas wou meesleur, borrel daar 'n gevoel van opgewondenheid in hom op toe hy na die plek kyk. Ron is daarbinne ... en mevrou Weasley, wat lekkerder kos kook as enigiemand wat hy ken ...

“As jy nie omgee nie, Harry,” sê Dumbledore terwyl hulle by die hekkie instap, “wil ek graag 'n woordjie met jou wissel voor ons uitmekaar gaan. Privaat. Dalk sommer daar?”

Dumbledore wys na 'n vervalte buitegebou van klip waar die Weasleys hul besems hou. Harry verstaan nie mooi nie, maar volg Dumbledore by die krakende deur in tot binne-in 'n ruimte wat effens kleiner as 'n gewone kas is. Dumbledore laat die punt van sy towerstaf soos 'n flits gloei en kyk glimlaggend af na Harry.

“Ek hoop jy sal my vergewe dat ek dit noem, Harry, maar ek is tevrede en 'n tikkie trots om te sien hoe goed jy oor die weg kom ná alles wat by die Ministerie gebeur het. Vergun my om te sê dat ek dink Sirius sou trots op jou gewees het.”

Harry sluk swaar; sy stem is skielik weg. Hy dink nie hy sal dit kan vat om nou oor Sirius praat nie. Dit was pynlik genoeg om te hoor hoe oom Vernon sê: “Is sy peetpa dood?” en selfs nog erger om te hoor hoe onverskillig Slughorn Sirius se naam noem.

“Dit was wreed,” sê Dumbledore sag, “dat jy en Sirius net so 'n kort tydjie saam kon hê. 'n Brutale einde aan wat 'n lang en gelukkige vriendskap moes gewees het.”

Harry knik terwyl hy stip bly kyk vir die spinnekop wat nou teen Dumbledore se hoed opklim. Hy weet Dumbledore verstaan en weet heel moontlik selfs dat hy wat Harry is tot die dag wat sy brief gekom het omtrent die hele tyd by die Dursleys op sy bed gelê en geweier het om te eet, dat hy net na die misnewels buite die venster gestaar het, vol van die ysige leegheid wat hy al geleer het om met die Dementors te assosieer.

“Dis vir my baie moeilik,” sê Harry uiteindelik in 'n skor stem, “om te aanvaar dat hy nooit weer vir my sal skryf nie.”

Sy oë brand skielik en hy knip hulle. Hy voel simpel om dit te erken, maar die feit dat hy iemand buite Hogwarts gehad het wat omgee wat met hom gebeur, amper soos 'n ouer, was een van die beste dinge van die ontdekking dat hy 'n peetpa het ... en nou sal die posuile nooit weer vir hom daardie gerusstelling bring nie ...

“Sirius was vir jou baie dinge wat jy nooit voorheen geken het nie,” sê Dumbledore simpatiek. “Om hom te verloor, moet vir jou verpletterend wees ...”

“Maar terwyl ek by die Dursleys was,” val Harry hom in die rede en sy stem begin sterker word, “het ek besef ek kan myself nie

afsonder of – of ineenstort nie. Sirius sou dit nie wou gehad het nie, sou hy? En in elk geval, die lewe is te kort ... kyk vir Madame Bones, kyk vir Emmeline Vance ... Ek kan maklik die volgende een wees. Maar as ek dit moet wees,” sê hy vurig en kyk nou reguit in Dumbledore se blou oë wat in die towerstaf se lig glinster, “dan gaan ek seker maak ek vat soveel Doodseters met my saam as wat ek kan, en Voldemort ook, as ek dit kan regkry.”

“Goed gesê! Jy is voorwaar jou ma en pa se seun en Sirius se eie peetkind!” sê Dumbledore en klop Harry goedkeurend op sy rug. “Ek haal my hoed vir jou af – of ek sou, as ek nie bang was ek gaan jou met spinnekoppe besaai nie.

“En nou, Harry, iets wat ten nouste hieraan verwant is ... Ek lei af jy het die afgelope twee weke die *Daaglikse Profeet* gelees?”

“Ja,” sê Harry en sy hart klop effens vinniger.

“Dan sou jy gesien het dat daar inligting oor jou avontuur in die Saal van Profesieë uitgelek het, of moet ek eerder sê daar was ’n vloedgolf daarvan?”

“Ja,” sê Harry weer. “En nou weet almal ek is die een –”

“Nee, hulle weet nie,” onderbreek Dumbledore hom. “Daar is net twee mense in die hele wêreld wat vertrou is met die volle inhoud van die profesie oor jou en die Heer Voldemort, en hulle staan albei in hierdie onwelriekende besemskuur vol spinnekoppe. Dit is egter só dat baie, heeltemal korrek, geraai het dat Voldemort sy Doodseters gestuur het om ’n profesie te steel en dat daardie profesie oor jou gaan.

“Nou luister, ek neem aan ek is reg as ek sê jy het vir niemand vertel jy weet wat die profesie sê nie?”

“Ja,” sê Harry.

“’n Wyse besluit, alles in ag genome,” sê Dumbledore. “Hoewel ek dink jy kan jou waaksaamheid verslap ten gunste van jou vriende, meneer Ronald Weasley en juffrou Hermione Granger. Ja,” gaan hy aan terwyl Harry hom verbaas aankyk, “ek dink hulle behoort te weet. Jy bewys hulle ’n ondiens deur hulle nie in jou vertrou te neem oor iets wat só belangrik is nie.”

“Ek wou hulle nie –”

“– bekommerd of bang maak nie?” sê Dumbledore en bekyk Harry van bo-oor sy halfmaanbrilglase. “Of miskien wou jy nie erken jy is self bekommerd en bang nie? Jy het jou vriende nodig, Harry. Soos jy tereg gesê het, sou Sirius nie wou hê jy moet jouself afsonder nie.”

Harry sê niks, maar dit lyk nie of Dumbledore ’n antwoord van hom verwag nie. Hy gaan aan: “En nou iets anders, maar ook

verwant aan ons gesprek: Dit is my wens dat jy vanjaar privaat lesse by my moet neem.”

“Privaat – by professor?” verbreek Harry sy ingedagte stilte verras.

“Ja, ek dink dit is tyd dat ek meer betrokke raak by jou onder-rig.”

“Wat gaan professor vir my leer?”

“O, ’n bietjie hiervan, ’n bietjie daarvan,” sê Dumbledore lugtig.

Harry wag vol hoop, maar Dumbledore brei nie uit nie, en dan vra hy maar iets anders wat hom effens pla.

“As ek lesse by u kry, sal ek dan nie Okklumensie-lesse by Snape hoef te neem nie?”

“Professor Snape, Harry – en nee, jy hoef nie.”

“Goed so,” sê Harry verlig, “want dit was ’n –”

Hy bly stil en sê eerder nie wat hy eintlik wou nie.

“Ek dink die woord ‘fiasko’ sal hier gepas wees,” sê Dumbledore en knik.

Harry lag.

“Wel, dit beteken ek sal van nou af nie meer baie met professor Snape te doen kry nie,” sê hy, “want hy gaan my nie toelaat om met Towerdrankies aan te gaan as ek nie ’n ‘Uitsonderlik’ vir my UIL kry nie, en ek weet ek het nie.”

“Moenie boe sê voor ’n uil nie hoe-hoe sê met jou uitslae nie,” sê Dumbledore doodernstig. “Wat, noudat ek daaraan dink, een of ander tyd later vandag behoort te wees. En nou is daar nog twee ander dinge voor ons groet, Harry.

“Eerstens – ek wil hê jy moet jou Onsigbaarheidsmantel van nou af ten alle tye by jou hou. Selfs binnekant Hogwarts self ook. Net vir ingeval, verstaan jy?”

Harry knik.

“En tweedens – terwyl jy hier bly, word Die Konynenes onderwerp aan die Ministerie van Towerkuns se strengste moontlike sekuriteits-maatreëls. Hierdie maatreëls sal ’n mate van ongerief vir Arthur en Molly teweegbring – al hul pos sal byvoorbeeld eers by die Ministerie nagegaan word voordat dit aangestuur word. Hulle gee egter glad nie om nie, want jou veiligheid kom vir hulle eerste. Dit sal dus van uiterste ondankbaarheid getuig as jy enigiets waaghalsig aanvang terwyl jy hier by hulle bly.”

“Ek verstaan,” sê Harry dadelik.

“Nou maar goed dan,” sê Dumbledore. Hy stoot die besemskuur se deur oop en betree die werf. “Ek sien lig in die kombuis. Kom ons ontnem Molly nie nog langer die kans om te betreur hoe maer jy is nie.”

CHAPTER FIVE



AN EXCESS OF PHLEGM

Harry and Dumbledore approached the back door of the Burrow, which was surrounded by the familiar litter of old Wellington boots and rusty cauldrons; Harry could hear the soft clucking of sleepy chickens coming from a distant shed. Dumbledore knocked three times and Harry saw sudden movement behind the kitchen window.

“Who’s there?” said a nervous voice he recognized as Mrs. Weasley’s. “Declare yourself!”

“It is I, Dumbledore, bringing Harry.”

The door opened at once. There stood Mrs. Weasley, short, plump, and wearing an old green dressing gown.

“Harry, dear! Gracious, Albus, you gave me a fright, you said not to expect you before morning!”

“We were lucky,” said Dumbledore, ushering Harry over the threshold. “Slughorn proved much more persuadable than I had expected. Harry’s doing, of course. Ah, hello, Nymphadora!”

Harry looked around and saw that Mrs. Weasley was not alone, despite the lateness of the hour. A young witch with a pale, heart-shaped face and mousy brown hair was sitting at the table clutching a large mug between her hands.

“Hello, Professor,” she said. “Wotcher, Harry.”

“Hi, Tonks.”

Harry thought she looked drawn, even ill, and there was something forced in her smile. Certainly her appearance was less colorful than usual without her customary shade of bubble-gum-pink hair.

“I’d better be off,” she said quickly, standing up and pulling her cloak around her shoulders. “Thanks for the tea and sympathy, Molly.”

“Please don’t leave on my account,” said Dumbledore courteously, “I cannot stay, I have urgent matters to discuss with Rufus Scrimgeour.”

“No, no, I need to get going,” said Tonks, not meeting Dumbledore’s eyes. “Night —”

“Dear, why not come to dinner at the weekend, Remus and Mad-Eye are coming — ?”

“No, really, Molly . . . thanks anyway . . . Good night, everyone.”

Tonks hurried past Dumbledore and Harry into the yard; a few paces beyond the doorstep, she turned on the spot and vanished into thin air. Harry noticed that Mrs. Weasley looked troubled.

“Well, I shall see you at Hogwarts, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

“Take care of yourself. Molly, your servant.”

He made Mrs. Weasley a bow and followed Tonks, vanishing at precisely the same spot. Mrs. Weasley closed the door on the empty yard and then steered Harry by the shoulders into the full glow of the lantern on the table to examine his appearance.

“You’re like Ron,” she sighed, looking him up and down. “Both of you look as though you’ve had Stretching Jinxes put on you. I swear Ron’s grown four inches since I last bought him school robes. Are you hungry, Harry?”

“Yeah, I am,” said Harry, suddenly realizing just how hungry he was.

“Sit down, dear, I’ll knock something up.”

As Harry sat down, a furry ginger cat with a squashed face jumped onto his knees and settled there, purring.

“So Hermione’s here?” he asked happily as he tickled Crookshanks behind the ears.

“Oh yes, she arrived the day before yesterday,” said Mrs. Weasley, rapping a large iron pot with her wand. It bounced onto the stove with a loud clang and began to bubble at once. “Everyone’s in bed, of course, we didn’t expect you for hours. Here you are —”

She tapped the pot again; it rose into the air, flew toward Harry, and tipped over; Mrs. Weasley slid a bowl neatly beneath it just in time to catch the stream of thick, steaming onion soup.

“Bread, dear?”

“Thanks, Mrs. Weasley.”

She waved her wand over her shoulder; a loaf of bread and a knife soared gracefully onto the table; as the loaf sliced itself and the soup

pot dropped back onto the stove, Mrs. Weasley sat down opposite him.

“So you persuaded Horace Slughorn to take the job?”

Harry nodded, his mouth so full of hot soup that he could not speak.

“He taught Arthur and me,” said Mrs. Weasley. “He was at Hogwarts for ages, started around the same time as Dumbledore, I think. Did you like him?”

His mouth now full of bread, Harry shrugged and gave a noncommittal jerk of the head.

“I know what you mean,” said Mrs. Weasley, nodding wisely. “Of course he can be charming when he wants to be, but Arthur’s never liked him much. The Ministry’s littered with Slughorn’s old favorites, he was always good at giving leg ups, but he never had much time for Arthur — didn’t seem to think he was enough of a highflier. Well, that just shows you, even Slughorn makes mistakes. I don’t know whether Ron’s told you in any of his letters — it’s only just happened — but Arthur’s been promoted!”

It could not have been clearer that Mrs. Weasley had been bursting to say this.

Harry swallowed a large amount of very hot soup and thought he could feel his throat blistering. “That’s great!” he gasped.

“You are sweet,” beamed Mrs. Weasley, possibly taking his watering eyes for emotion at the news. “Yes, Rufus Scrimgeour has set up several new offices in response to the present situation, and Arthur’s heading the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects. It’s a big job,

he's got ten people reporting to him now!"

"What exactly — ?"

"Well, you see, in all the panic about You-Know-Who, odd things have been cropping up for sale everywhere, things that are supposed to guard against You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters. You can imagine the kind of thing — so-called protective potions that are really gravy with a bit of bubotuber pus added, or instructions for defensive jinxes that actually make your ears fall off. . . . Well, in the main the perpetrators are just people like Mundungus Fletcher, who've never done an honest day's work in their lives and are taking advantage of how frightened everybody is, but every now and then something really nasty turns up. The other day Arthur confiscated a box of cursed Sneakoscopes that were almost certainly planted by a Death Eater. So you see, it's a very important job, and I tell him it's just silly to miss dealing with spark plugs and toasters and all the rest of that Muggle rubbish." Mrs. Weasley ended her speech with a stern look, as if it had been Harry suggesting that it was natural to miss spark plugs.

"Is Mr. Weasley still at work?" Harry asked.

"Yes, he is. As a matter of fact, he's a tiny bit late. . . . He said he'd be back around midnight. . . ."

She turned to look at a large clock that was perched awkwardly on top of a pile of sheets in the washing basket at the end of the table. Harry recognized it at once: It had nine hands, each inscribed with the name of a family member, and usually hung on the Weasleys' sitting room wall, though its current position suggested that Mrs. Weasley had taken to carrying it around the house with her. Every

single one of its nine hands was now pointing at “mortal peril.”

“It’s been like that for a while now,” said Mrs. Weasley, in an unconvincingly casual voice, “ever since You-Know-Who came back into the open. I suppose everybody’s in mortal danger now. . . . I don’t think it can be just our family . . . but I don’t know anyone else who’s got a clock like this, so I can’t check. Oh!”

With a sudden exclamation she pointed at the clock’s face. Mr. Weasley’s hand had switched to “traveling.”

“He’s coming!”

And sure enough, a moment later there was a knock on the back door. Mrs. Weasley jumped up and hurried to it; with one hand on the doorknob and her face pressed against the wood she called softly, “Arthur, is that you?”

“Yes,” came Mr. Weasley’s weary voice. “But I would say that even if I were a Death Eater, dear. Ask the question!”

“Oh, honestly . . .”

“Molly!”

“All right, all right . . . What is your dearest ambition?”

“To find out how airplanes stay up.”

Mrs. Weasley nodded and turned the doorknob, but apparently Mr. Weasley was holding tight to it on the other side, because the door remained firmly shut.

“Molly! I’ve got to ask you your question first!”

“Arthur, really, this is just silly. . . .”

“What do you like me to call you when we’re alone together?”

Even by the dim light of the lantern Harry could tell that Mrs.

Weasley had turned bright red; he himself felt suddenly warm around the ears and neck, and hastily gulped soup, clattering his spoon as loudly as he could against the bowl.

“Mollywobbles,” whispered a mortified Mrs. Weasley into the crack at the edge of the door.

“Correct,” said Mr. Weasley. “Now you can let me in.”

Mrs. Weasley opened the door to reveal her husband, a thin, balding, red-haired wizard wearing horn-rimmed spectacles and a long and dusty traveling cloak.

“I still don’t see why we have to go through that every time you come home,” said Mrs. Weasley, still pink in the face as she helped her husband out of his cloak. “I mean, a Death Eater might have forced the answer out of you before impersonating you!”

“I know, dear, but it’s Ministry procedure, and I have to set an example. Something smells good — onion soup?”

Mr. Weasley turned hopefully in the direction of the table.

“Harry! We didn’t expect you until morning!”

They shook hands, and Mr. Weasley dropped into the chair beside Harry as Mrs. Weasley set a bowl of soup in front of him too.

“Thanks, Molly. It’s been a tough night. Some idiot’s started selling Metamorph-Medals. Just sling them around your neck and you’ll be able to change your appearance at will. A hundred thousand disguises, all for ten Galleons!”

“And what really happens when you put them on?”

“Mostly you just turn a fairly unpleasant orange color, but a couple of people have also sprouted tentaclelike warts all over their bodies. As if St. Mungo’s didn’t have enough to do already!”

"It sounds like the sort of thing Fred and George would find funny," said Mrs. Weasley hesitantly. "Are you sure — ?"

"Of course I am!" said Mr. Weasley. "The boys wouldn't do anything like that now, not when people are desperate for protection!"

"So is that why you're late, Metamorph-Medals?"

"No, we got wind of a nasty backfiring jinx down in Elephant and Castle, but luckily the Magical Law Enforcement Squad had sorted it out by the time we got there. . . ."

Harry stifled a yawn behind his hand.

"Bed," said an undeceived Mrs. Weasley at once. "I've got Fred and George's room all ready for you, you'll have it to yourself."

"Why, where are they?"

"Oh, they're in Diagon Alley, sleeping in the little flat over their joke shop as they're so busy," said Mrs. Weasley. "I must say, I didn't approve at first, but they do seem to have a bit of a flair for business! Come on, dear, your trunk's already up there."

"Night, Mr. Weasley," said Harry, pushing back his chair. Crookshanks leapt lightly from his lap and slunk out of the room.

"G'night, Harry," said Mr. Weasley.

Harry saw Mrs. Weasley glance at the clock in the washing basket as they left the kitchen. All the hands were once again at "mortal peril."

Fred and George's bedroom was on the second floor. Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at a lamp on the bedside table and it ignited at once, bathing the room in a pleasant golden glow. Though a large vase of flowers had been placed on a desk in front of the small

window, their perfume could not disguise the lingering smell of what Harry thought was gunpowder. A considerable amount of floor space was devoted to a vast number of unmarked, sealed cardboard boxes, amongst which stood Harry's school trunk. The room looked as though it was being used as a temporary warehouse.

Hedwig hooted happily at Harry from her perch on top of a large wardrobe, then took off through the window; Harry knew she had been waiting to see him before going hunting. Harry bade Mrs. Weasley good night, put on pajamas, and got into one of the beds. There was something hard inside the pillowcase. He groped inside it and pulled out a sticky purple-and-orange sweet, which he recognized as a Puking Pastille. Smiling to himself, he rolled over and was instantly asleep.

Seconds later, or so it seemed to Harry, he was awakened by what sounded like cannon fire as the door burst open. Sitting bolt upright, he heard the rasp of the curtains being pulled back: The dazzling sunlight seemed to poke him hard in both eyes. Shielding them with one hand, he groped hopelessly for his glasses with the other.

“Wuzzgoignon?”

“We didn't know you were here already!” said a loud and excited voice, and he received a sharp blow to the top of the head.

“Ron, don't hit him!” said a girl's voice reproachfully.

Harry's hand found his glasses and he shoved them on, though the light was so bright he could hardly see anyway. A long, looming shadow quivered in front of him for a moment; he blinked and Ron Weasley came into focus, grinning down at him.

“All right?”

“Never been better,” said Harry, rubbing the top of his head and slumping back onto his pillows. “You?”

“Not bad,” said Ron, pulling over a cardboard box and sitting on it. “When did you get here? Mum’s only just told us!”

“About one o’clock this morning.”

“Were the Muggles all right? Did they treat you okay?”

“Same as usual,” said Harry, as Hermione perched herself on the edge of his bed, “they didn’t talk to me much, but I like it better that way. How’re you, Hermione?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” said Hermione, who was scrutinizing Harry as though he was sickening for something. He thought he knew what was behind this, and as he had no wish to discuss Sirius’s death or any other miserable subject at the moment, he said, “What’s the time? Have I missed breakfast?”

“Don’t worry about that, Mum’s bringing you up a tray; she reckons you look underfed,” said Ron, rolling his eyes. “So, what’s been going on?”

“Nothing much, I’ve just been stuck at my aunt and uncle’s, haven’t I?”

“Come off it!” said Ron. “You’ve been off with Dumbledore!”

“It wasn’t that exciting. He just wanted me to help him persuade this old teacher to come out of retirement. His name’s Horace Slughorn.”

“Oh,” said Ron, looking disappointed. “We thought —”

Hermione flashed a warning look at Ron, and Ron changed tack at top speed.

“— we thought it’d be something like that.”

“You did?” said Harry, amused.

“Yeah . . . yeah, now Umbridge has left, obviously we need a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, don’t we? So, er, what’s he like?”

“He looks a bit like a walrus, and he used to be Head of Slytherin,” said Harry. “Something wrong, Hermione?”

She was watching him as though expecting strange symptoms to manifest themselves at any moment. She rearranged her features hastily in an unconvincing smile.

“No, of course not! So, um, did Slughorn seem like he’ll be a good teacher?”

“Dunno,” said Harry. “He can’t be worse than Umbridge, can he?”

“I know someone who’s worse than Umbridge,” said a voice from the doorway. Ron’s younger sister slouched into the room, looking irritable. “Hi, Harry.”

“What’s up with you?” Ron asked.

“It’s *her*,” said Ginny, plonking herself down on Harry’s bed. “She’s driving me mad.”

“What’s she done now?” asked Hermione sympathetically.

“It’s the way she talks to me — you’d think I was about three!”

“I know,” said Hermione, dropping her voice. “She’s so full of herself.”

Harry was astonished to hear Hermione talking about Mrs. Weasley like this and could not blame Ron for saying angrily, “Can’t you two lay off her for five seconds?”

“Oh, that’s right, defend her,” snapped Ginny. “We all know you can’t get enough of her.”

This seemed an odd comment to make about Ron's mother. Starting to feel that he was missing something, Harry said, "Who are you — ?"

But his question was answered before he could finish it. The bedroom door flew open again, and Harry instinctively yanked the bedcovers up to his chin so hard that Hermione and Ginny slid off the bed onto the floor.

A young woman was standing in the doorway, a woman of such breathtaking beauty that the room seemed to have become strangely airless. She was tall and willowy with long blonde hair and appeared to emanate a faint, silvery glow. To complete this vision of perfection, she was carrying a heavily laden breakfast tray.

"'Arry," she said in a throaty voice. "Eet 'as been too long!"

As she swept over the threshold toward him, Mrs. Weasley was revealed, bobbing along in her wake, looking rather cross.

"There was no need to bring up the tray, I was just about to do it myself!"

"Eet was no trouble," said Fleur Delacour, setting the tray across Harry's knees and then swooping to kiss him on each cheek: He felt the places where her mouth had touched him burn. "I 'ave been longing to see 'im. You remember my seester, Gabrielle? She never stops talking about 'Arry Potter. She will be delighted to see you again."

"Oh . . . is she here too?" Harry croaked.

"No, no, silly boy," said Fleur with a tinkling laugh, "I mean next summer, when we — but do you not know?"

Her great blue eyes widened and she looked reproachfully at Mrs.

Weasley, who said, “We hadn’t got around to telling him yet.”

Fleur turned back to Harry, swinging her silvery sheet of hair so that it whipped Mrs. Weasley across the face.

“Bill and I are going to be married!”

“Oh,” said Harry blankly. He could not help noticing how Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, and Ginny were all determinedly avoiding one another’s gaze. “Wow. Er — congratulations!”

She swooped down upon him and kissed him again.

“Bill is very busy at ze moment, working very ’ard, and I only work part-time at Gringotts for my Eenglish, so he brought me ’ere for a few days to get to know ’is family properly. I was so pleased to ’ear you would be coming — zere isn’t much to do ’ere, unless you like cooking and chickens! Well — enjoy your breakfast, ’Arry!”

With these words she turned gracefully and seemed to float out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Mrs. Weasley made a noise that sounded like “tchah!”

“Mum hates her,” said Ginny quietly.

“I do not hate her!” said Mrs. Weasley in a cross whisper. “I just think they’ve hurried into this engagement, that’s all!”

“They’ve known each other a year,” said Ron, who looked oddly groggy and was staring at the closed door.

“Well, that’s not very long! I know why it’s happened, of course. It’s all this uncertainty with You-Know-Who coming back, people think they might be dead tomorrow, so they’re rushing all sorts of decisions they’d normally take time over. It was the same last time he was powerful, people eloping left, right, and center —”

“Including you and Dad,” said Ginny slyly.

“Yes, well, your father and I were made for each other, what was the point in waiting?” said Mrs. Weasley. “Whereas Bill and Fleur . . . well . . . what have they really got in common? He’s a hardworking, down-to-earth sort of person, whereas she’s —”

“A cow,” said Ginny, nodding. “But Bill’s not that down-to-earth. He’s a Curse-Breaker, isn’t he, he likes a bit of adventure, a bit of glamour. . . . I expect that’s why he’s gone for Phlegm.”

“Stop calling her that, Ginny,” said Mrs. Weasley sharply, as Harry and Hermione laughed. “Well, I’d better get on. . . . Eat your eggs while they’re warm, Harry.”

Looking careworn, she left the room. Ron still seemed slightly punch-drunk; he was shaking his head experimentally like a dog trying to rid its ears of water.

“Don’t you get used to her if she’s staying in the same house?” Harry asked.

“Well, you do,” said Ron, “but if she jumps out at you unexpectedly, like then . . .”

“It’s pathetic,” said Hermione furiously, striding away from Ron as far as she could go and turning to face him with her arms folded once she had reached the wall.

“You don’t really want her around forever?” Ginny asked Ron incredulously. When he merely shrugged, she said, “Well, Mum’s going to put a stop to it if she can, I bet you anything.”

“How’s she going to manage that?” asked Harry.

“She keeps trying to get Tonks round for dinner. I think she’s hoping Bill will fall for Tonks instead. I hope he does, I’d much rather have her in the family.”

“Yeah, that’ll work,” said Ron sarcastically. “Listen, no bloke in his right mind’s going to fancy Tonks when Fleur’s around. I mean, Tonks is okay-looking when she isn’t doing stupid things to her hair and her nose, but —”

“She’s a damn sight nicer than *Phlegm*,” said Ginny.

“And she’s more intelligent, she’s an Auror!” said Hermione from the corner.

“Fleur’s not stupid, she was good enough to enter the Triwizard Tournament,” said Harry.

“Not you as well!” said Hermione bitterly.

“I suppose you like the way Phlegm says ‘Arry,’ do you?” asked Ginny scornfully.

“No,” said Harry, wishing he hadn’t spoken, “I was just saying, Phlegm — I mean, Fleur —”

“I’d much rather have Tonks in the family,” said Ginny. “At least she’s a laugh.”

“She hasn’t been much of a laugh lately,” said Ron. “Every time I’ve seen her she’s looked more like Moaning Myrtle.”

“That’s not fair,” snapped Hermione. “She still hasn’t got over what happened . . . you know . . . I mean, he was her cousin!”

Harry’s heart sank. They had arrived at Sirius. He picked up a fork and began shoveling scrambled eggs into his mouth, hoping to deflect any invitation to join in this part of the conversation.

“Tonks and Sirius barely knew each other!” said Ron. “Sirius was in Azkaban half her life and before that their families never met —”

“That’s not the point,” said Hermione. “She thinks it was her fault he died!”

“How does she work that one out?” asked Harry, in spite of himself.

“Well, she was fighting Bellatrix Lestrange, wasn’t she? I think she feels that if only she had finished her off, Bellatrix couldn’t have killed Sirius.”

“That’s stupid,” said Ron.

“It’s survivor’s guilt,” said Hermione. “I know Lupin’s tried to talk her round, but she’s still really down. She’s actually having trouble with her Metamorphosing!”

“With her — ?”

“She can’t change her appearance like she used to,” explained Hermione. “I think her powers must have been affected by shock, or something.”

“I didn’t know that could happen,” said Harry.

“Nor did I,” said Hermione, “but I suppose if you’re really depressed . . .”

The door opened again and Mrs. Weasley popped her head in. “Ginny,” she whispered, “come downstairs and help me with the lunch.”

“I’m talking to this lot!” said Ginny, outraged.

“Now!” said Mrs. Weasley, and withdrew.

“She only wants me there so she doesn’t have to be alone with Phlegm!” said Ginny crossly. She swung her long red hair around in a very good imitation of Fleur and pranced across the room with her arms held aloft like a ballerina.

“You lot had better come down quickly too,” she said as she left.

Harry took advantage of the temporary silence to eat more

breakfast. Hermione was peering into Fred and George's boxes, though every now and then she cast sideways looks at Harry. Ron, who was now helping himself to Harry's toast, was still gazing dreamily at the door.

"What's this?" Hermione asked eventually, holding up what looked like a small telescope.

"Dunno," said Ron, "but if Fred and George've left it here, it's probably not ready for the joke shop yet, so be careful."

"Your mum said the shop's going well," said Harry. "Said Fred and George have got a real flair for business."

"That's an understatement," said Ron. "They're raking in the Galleons! I can't wait to see the place, we haven't been to Diagon Alley yet, because Mum says Dad's got to be there for extra security and he's been really busy at work, but it sounds excellent."

"And what about Percy?" asked Harry; the third-eldest Weasley brother had fallen out with the rest of the family. "Is he talking to your mum and dad again?"

"Nope," said Ron.

"But he knows your dad was right all along now about Voldemort being back —"

"Dumbledore says people find it far easier to forgive others for being wrong than being right," said Hermione. "I heard him telling your mum, Ron."

"Sounds like the sort of mental thing Dumbledore would say," said Ron.

"He's going to be giving me private lessons this year," said Harry conversationally.

Ron choked on his bit of toast, and Hermione gasped.

“You kept that quiet!” said Ron.

“I only just remembered,” said Harry honestly. “He told me last night in your broom shed.”

“Blimey . . . private lessons with Dumbledore!” said Ron, looking impressed. “I wonder why he’s . . . ?”

His voice tailed away. Harry saw him and Hermione exchange looks. Harry laid down his knife and fork, his heart beating rather fast considering that all he was doing was sitting in bed. Dumbledore had said to do it. . . . Why not now? He fixed his eyes on his fork, which was gleaming in the sunlight streaming into his lap, and said, “I don’t know exactly why he’s going to be giving me lessons, but I think it must be because of the prophecy.”

Neither Ron nor Hermione spoke. Harry had the impression that both had frozen. He continued, still speaking to his fork, “You know, the one they were trying to steal at the Ministry.”

“Nobody knows what it said, though,” said Hermione quickly. “It got smashed.”

“Although the *Prophet* says —” began Ron, but Hermione said, “Shh!”

“The *Prophet*’s got it right,” said Harry, looking up at them both with a great effort. Hermione seemed frightened and Ron amazed. “That glass ball that smashed wasn’t the only record of the prophecy. I heard the whole thing in Dumbledore’s office, he was the one the prophecy was made to, so he could tell me. From what it said,” Harry took a deep breath, “it looks like I’m the one who’s got to finish off Voldemort. . . . At least, it said neither of us could live

while the other survives.”

The three of them gazed at one another in silence for a moment. Then there was a loud bang and Hermione vanished behind a puff of black smoke.

“Hermione!” shouted Harry and Ron; the breakfast tray slid to the floor with a crash.

Hermione emerged, coughing, out of the smoke, clutching the telescope and sporting a brilliantly purple black eye.

“I squeezed it and it — it punched me!” she gasped.

And sure enough, they now saw a tiny fist on a long spring protruding from the end of the telescope.

“Don’t worry,” said Ron, who was plainly trying not to laugh, “Mum’ll fix that, she’s good at healing minor injuries —”

“Oh well, never mind that now!” said Hermione hastily. “Harry, oh, Harry . . .”

She sat down on the edge of his bed again.

“We wondered, after we got back from the Ministry . . . Obviously, we didn’t want to say anything to you, but from what Lucius Malfoy said about the prophecy, how it was about you and Voldemort, well, we thought it might be something like this. . . . Oh, Harry . . .” She stared at him, then whispered, “Are you scared?”

“Not as much as I was,” said Harry. “When I first heard it, I was . . . but now, it seems as though I always knew I’d have to face him in the end. . . .”

“When we heard Dumbledore was collecting you in person, we thought he might be telling you something or showing you something to do with the prophecy,” said Ron eagerly. “And we were kind of

right, weren't we? He wouldn't be giving you lessons if he thought you were a goner, wouldn't waste his time — he must think you've got a chance!"

"That's true," said Hermione. "I wonder what he'll teach you, Harry? Really advanced defensive magic, probably . . . powerful counterurses . . . anti-jinxes . . ."

Harry did not really listen. A warmth was spreading through him that had nothing to do with the sunlight; a tight obstruction in his chest seemed to be dissolving. He knew that Ron and Hermione were more shocked than they were letting on, but the mere fact that they were still there on either side of him, speaking bracing words of comfort, not shrinking from him as though he were contaminated or dangerous, was worth more than he could ever tell them.

". . . and evasive enchantments generally," concluded Hermione. "Well, at least you know one lesson you'll be having this year, that's one more than Ron and me. I wonder when our O.W.L. results will come?"

"Can't be long now, it's been a month," said Ron.

"Hang on," said Harry, as another part of last night's conversation came back to him. "I think Dumbledore said our O.W.L. results would be arriving today!"

"Today?" shrieked Hermione. "*Today?* But why didn't you — oh my God — you should have said —"

She leapt to her feet.

"I'm going to see whether any owls have come. . . ."

But when Harry arrived downstairs ten minutes later, fully dressed and carrying his empty breakfast tray, it was to find Hermione sitting

at the kitchen table in great agitation, while Mrs. Weasley tried to lessen her resemblance to half a panda.

“It just won’t budge,” Mrs. Weasley was saying anxiously, standing over Hermione with her wand in her hand and a copy of *The Healer’s Helpmate* open at “Bruises, Cuts, and Abrasions.” “This has always worked before, I just can’t understand it.”

“It’ll be Fred and George’s idea of a funny joke, making sure it can’t come off,” said Ginny.

“But it’s got to come off!” squeaked Hermione. “I can’t go around looking like this forever!”

“You won’t, dear, we’ll find an antidote, don’t worry,” said Mrs. Weasley soothingly.

“Bill told me ’ow Fred and George are very amusing!” said Fleur, smiling serenely.

“Yes, I can hardly breathe for laughing,” snapped Hermione.

She jumped up and started walking round and round the kitchen, twisting her fingers together.

“Mrs. Weasley, you’re quite, quite sure no owls have arrived this morning?”

“Yes, dear, I’d have noticed,” said Mrs. Weasley patiently. “But it’s barely nine, there’s still plenty of time. . . .”

“I know I messed up Ancient Runes,” muttered Hermione feverishly, “I definitely made at least one serious mistranslation. And the Defense Against the Dark Arts practical was no good at all. I thought Transfiguration went all right at the time, but looking back —”

“Hermione, will you shut up, you’re not the only one who’s

nervous!” barked Ron. “And when you’ve got your ten ‘Outstanding’ O.W.L.s . . .”

“Don’t, don’t, don’t!” said Hermione, flapping her hands hysterically. “I know I’ve failed everything!”

“What happens if we fail?” Harry asked the room at large, but it was again Hermione who answered.

“We discuss our options with our Head of House, I asked Professor McGonagall at the end of last term.”

Harry’s stomach squirmed. He wished he had eaten less breakfast.

“At Beauxbatons,” said Fleur complacently, “we ’ad a different way of doing things. I think eet was better. We sat our examinations after six years of study, not five, and then —”

Fleur’s words were drowned in a scream. Hermione was pointing through the kitchen window. Three black specks were clearly visible in the sky, growing larger all the time.

“They’re definitely owls,” said Ron hoarsely, jumping up to join Hermione at the window.

“And there are three of them,” said Harry, hastening to her other side.

“One for each of us,” said Hermione in a terrified whisper. “Oh no . . . oh no . . . oh no . . .”

She gripped both Harry and Ron tightly around the elbows.

The owls were flying directly at the Burrow, three handsome tawnies, each of which, it became clear as they flew lower over the path leading up to the house, was carrying a large square envelope.

“Oh *no*!” squealed Hermione.

Mrs. Weasley squeezed past them and opened the kitchen window.

One, two, three, the owls soared through it and landed on the table in a neat line. All three of them lifted their right legs.

Harry moved forward. The letter addressed to him was tied to the leg of the owl in the middle. He untied it with fumbling fingers. To his left, Ron was trying to detach his own results; to his right, Hermione's hands were shaking so much she was making her whole owl tremble.

Nobody in the kitchen spoke. At last, Harry managed to detach the envelope. He slit it open quickly and unfolded the parchment inside.

ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL RESULTS

Pass Grades

OUTSTANDING (O)

EXCEEDS EXPECTATIONS (E)

ACCEPTABLE (A)

Fail Grades

POOR (P)

DREADFUL (D)

TROLL (T)

Harry James Potter has achieved:

Astronomy	A
Care of Magical Creatures	E
Charms	E
Defense Against the Dark Arts	O
Divination	P
Herbology	E
History of Magic	D
Potions	E
Transfiguration	E

Harry read the parchment through several times, his breathing becoming easier with each reading. It was all right: He had always known that he would fail Divination, and he had had no chance of passing History of Magic, given that he had collapsed halfway through the examination, but he had passed everything else! He ran his finger down the grades . . . he had passed well in Transfiguration and Herbology, he had even exceeded expectations at Potions! And best of all, he had achieved “Outstanding” at Defense Against the Dark Arts!

He looked around. Hermione had her back to him and her head bent, but Ron was looking delighted.

“Only failed Divination and History of Magic, and who cares about them?” he said happily to Harry. “Here — swap —”

Harry glanced down Ron’s grades: There were no “Outstandings” there. . . .

“Knew you’d be top at Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Ron, punching Harry on the shoulder. “We’ve done all right, haven’t we?”

“Well done!” said Mrs. Weasley proudly, ruffling Ron’s hair. “Seven O.W.L.s, that’s more than Fred and George got together!”

“Hermione?” said Ginny tentatively, for Hermione still hadn’t turned around. “How did you do?”

“I — not bad,” said Hermione in a small voice.

“Oh, come off it,” said Ron, striding over to her and whipping her results out of her hand. “Yep — nine ‘Outstandings’ and one ‘Exceeds Expectations’ at Defense Against the Dark Arts.” He looked down at her, half-amused, half-exasperated. “You’re actually disappointed, aren’t you?”

Hermione shook her head, but Harry laughed.

“Well, we’re N.E.W.T. students now!” grinned Ron. “Mum, are there any more sausages?”

Harry looked back down at his results. They were as good as he could have hoped for. He felt just one tiny twinge of regret. . . . This was the end of his ambition to become an Auror. He had not secured the required Potions grade. He had known all along that he wouldn’t, but he still felt a sinking in his stomach as he looked again at that small black E.

It was odd, really, seeing that it had been a Death Eater in disguise who had first told Harry he would make a good Auror, but somehow the idea had taken hold of him, and he couldn’t really think of anything else he would like to be. Moreover, it had seemed the right destiny for him since he had heard the prophecy a few weeks ago. . . . *Neither can live while the other survives.* . . . Wouldn’t he be living up to the prophecy, and giving himself the best chance of survival, if he joined those highly trained wizards whose job it was to find and

kill Voldemort?

'n Slymerige Storie

Harry en Dumbledore stap tot by Die Konynenes se agterdeur waar 'n gesellige deurmekaarspul van ou waterstewels en geroeste heksetels hulle begroet. Harry hoor die sagte gekloek van kuikens wat iewers in 'n skuur slaap. Dumbledore klop drie keer en Harry sien skielik 'n beweging agter die kombuisvenster.

“Wie's daar?” vra 'n senuweeagtige stem wat hy as mevrou Weasley s'n herken. “Identifiseer jouself!”

“Dit is ek, Dumbledore, wat vir Harry bring.”

Die deur gaan dadelik oop en daar staan mevrou Weasley: kort, geset en met 'n ou groen kamerjas aan.

“Harry, skat! Genade, Albus, jy het my laat skrik. Jy't gesê ons moet julle nie voor môreoggend verwag nie!”

“Ons was gelukkig,” sê Dumbledore en lei Harry oor die drummel. “Slughorn was toe baie meer oortuigbaar as wat ek verwag het. Danksy Harry, natuurlik. A, hallo, Nymphadora!”

Harry kyk rond en sien nou eers mevrou Weasley is nie alleen nie, al is dit al so laat. 'n Jong heks met 'n bleek, hartvormige gesig en muisbruin hare sit by die tafel en klem 'n groot beker tussen haar hande vas.

“Naand, professor,” sê sy. “Haai, Harry.”

“Haai, Tonks.”

Sy lyk vir Harry afgerem, selfs siek, en daar is iets geforseerds in haar glimlag. Tonks lyk beslis minder kleurvol sonder haar gebruiklike kougompient hare.

“Ek moet weg wees,” sê sy vinnig en trek haar mantel oor haar skouers. “Dankie vir die tee en simpatie, Molly.”

“Moet asseblief nie oor my wil gaan nie,” sê Dumbledore beleefd. “Ek kan nie vertoef nie. Daar's dringende sake wat ek met Rufus Scrimgeour moet gaan bespreek.”

“Nee, nee, ek moet regtig loop,” sê Tonks sonder om Dumbledore in die oë te kyk. “Nag —”

“Skat, wat van aandete dié naweek? Remus en Maloog gaan ook kom.”

“Nee, regtig, Molly ... maar dankie ... Goeienag, almal.”

Tonks glip haastig verby Dumbledore en Harry uit werf toe; ’n paar tree anderkant die drumpel gaan sy staan, begin tol en verdwyn in die niet. Harry kom agter dat mevrou Weasley bekommerd lyk.

“Wel, sien jou dan by Hogwarts, Harry,” sê Dumbledore. “Kyk mooi na jouself. Molly, dienswillig die uwe.”

Hy maak ’n buiging vir mevrou Weasley, volg Tonks en verdwyn op presies dieselfde plek. Die werf is nou leeg en mevrou Weasley maak die deur toe. Sy kry Harry aan die skouers beet en stuur hom tot in die volle gloed van die lantern op die tafel sodat sy ondersoek kan instel na hoe hy lyk.

“Jy’s nes Ron,” sug sy terwyl sy hom op en af kyk. “Julle lyk al twee of iemand julle met Rekdoepas getoor het. Ek sweer Ron het vier duim gegroei van ek laas vir hom skoolmantels gekoop het. Is jy honger, Harry?”

“Ja, ek is,” sê Harry wat skielik besef hóé honger hy eintlik is.

“Kom sit, skat. Ek slaan vir jou iets aanmekaar.”

Harry gaan sit en ’n wollerige gemmerkat met ’n plat gesig spring op sy knieë en maak hom spinnend daar tuis. “Hermione is dus hier?” vra hy bly terwyl hy Kromskeen agter die oor krap.

“O ja, sy’t eergister hier aangekom,” sê mevrou Weasley en tik met haar towerstaf teen ’n groot ysterpot. Die pot hop met ’n harde kadwar tot op die stoof en sy inhoud begin dadelik prut. “Almal is natuurlik al in die bed. Ons het jou nie nou al verwag nie, maar hier is jy –”

Sy tik weer teen die pot; hy styg in die lug op, vlieg na Harry toe en kantel; mevrou Weasley skuif rats ’n bakkie onder die pot in, net betyds om ’n stroom dik, stomende uiesop op te vang.

“Brood, skat?”

“Dankie, mevrou Weasley.”

Sy swaai haar towerstaf oor haar skouer; ’n brood en mes sweef sierlik tafel toe. Terwyl die brood homself sny en die soppot terug stoof toe gaan, kom sit mevrou Weasley oorkant Harry.

“So jy het Horace Slughorn omgepraat om die werk te vat?”

Harry knik; sy mond is so vol warm sop dat hy nie kan praat nie.

“Hy was een van my en Arthur se onderwysers,” sê mevrou Weasley. “Hy was eeue lank by Hogwarts. Ek dink hy en Dumbledore het omtrent saam daar begin. Hou jy van hom?”

Sy mond is nou vol brood; Harry haal dus een skouer op en draai sy kop skuins om te wys hy is onseker.

“Ek weet wat jy bedoel,” sê mevrou Weasley en knik begrypend.

“Hy kan baie sjarmant wees as hy wil, maar Arthur het nooit juis

van hom gehou nie. Die Ministerie is vervuil van al Slughorn se ou witbroodjies; hy het studente altyd graag 'n hupstootjie gegee, maar hy het nooit ooghare vir Arthur gehad nie – seker nie gedink hy't dit in hom om eendag 'n hoë kokkedoor te word nie. Wel, wys jou nou net: selfs Slughorn maak foute. Ek weet nie of Ron jou in een van sy briewe vertel het nie – dit het nou onlangs eers gebeur – maar Arthur is bevorder!”

Harry besef mevrou Weasley bars lankal om dit vir hom te vertel. Hy sluk 'n groot lepel vuurwarm sop en verbeel hom hy kan die blase in sy keel voel.

“Dis wonderlik!” snak hy.

“Jy's 'n skat,” sê mevrou Weasley, wat seker dink die trane in sy oë is van aandoening oor die nuus. “Ja, Rufus Scrimgeour het 'n hele paar nuwe afdelings op die been gebring om die huidige situasie die hoof te bied en Arthur is Hoof van die Kantoor vir die Opsporing en Konfiskering van Vervalste Verdedigingspaljasse en Beskermende Voorwerpe. Dis 'n verantwoordelike werk; daar is nou tien mense wat aan hom rapporteer!”

“Wat presies – ?”

“Wel, sien jy, te midde van al die paniek oor Jy-Weet-Wie duik daar skielik oral die vreemdste dinge te koop op, goed wat veronderstel is om jou teen Jy-Weet-Wie en die Doodseters te beskerm. Jy kan jou voorstel wat alles – kastige beskermingsdrankies wat in werklikheid net sous is met 'n bietjie builepessap by, of instruksies vir verdedigingsvloeke wat eintlik jou ore laat afval ... Wel, die oortreders is hoofsaaklik net mense soos Mundungus Fletcher wat in sy lewe nog nooit 'n steek eerlike werk gedoen het nie en die feit dat almal nou so benoud is, uitbuit, maar elke nou en dan duik daar iets regtig geniepsigs op. Nou die dag het Arthur 'n boks Loerskope wat vervloek was, gekonfiskeer, en hy's seker 'n Doodseter het die goed daar geplant. Sien jy, dis 'n baie belangrike werk, en ek sê vir hom dis sommer nonsens dat hy dit mis om met vonkproppe en broodroosters en al daai ander Moggel-gemors te smous.” Mevrou Weasley beëindig haar toespraak met 'n streng frons, asof Harry gesê het dit maak sin om vonkproppe te mis.

“Is meneer Weasley nog by die werk?” vra Harry.

“Ja, hy is. Om die waarheid te sê, hy's 'n klein bietjie laat ... Hy't gesê hy sal teen middernag terug wees ...”

Sy draai om en kyk na die groot wekker wat wankelrig bo-op 'n hoop lakens in die wasgoedmandjie aan die punt van die tafel gebalanseer staan. Harry herken dit dadelik: dit het nege wysers, elk een met 'n familielid se naam op gegraveer, en hang gewoonlik teen

die Weasleys se sitkamermuur, alhoewel sy huidige posisie dit laat lyk asof mevrou Weasley hom oral in die huis saam met haar rond-dra. Elke enkele een van die nege wysers wys nou na *doodsgevaar*.

“Dis nou al ’n ruk lank so,” sê mevrou Weasley en probeer tevergeefs onverskillig daaroor klink, “vandat Jy-Weet-Wie weer sy opwagting gemaak het. Ek veronderstel almal verkeer nou in doodsgevaar ... Ek dink nie dis net ons gesin nie ... maar ek weet van niemand anders wat so ’n wekker het nie, so ek kan nie seker maak nie. Ai tog!”

Met ’n skielike uitroep wys sy na die wekker. Meneer Weasley se wyser het na *reis* beweeg.

“Hy kom!”

En sowaar, ’n oomblik later is daar ’n klop aan die agterdeur. Mevrou Weasley spring op en loop haastig soontoe; met een hand op die deurknop en haar gesig teen die hout vasgedruk roep sy sag: “Arthur, is dit jy?”

“Ja,” kom meneer Weasley se moeë stem. “Maar ek sal so sê al is ek ook ’n Doodseter, skat. Vra die vraag!”

“Bid jou aan!”

“Molly!”

“Goed dan, goed dan ... Wat is jou grootste hartewens?”

“Om uit te vind hoe vliegtuie in die lug bly.”

Mevrou Weasley knik en draai die deurknop, maar blykbaar hou meneer Weasley dit aan die ander kant styf vas, want die deur bly stewig toe.

“Molly! Ek moet eers vir jou *jou* vraag vra!”

“Arthur, regtig, dis nou sommer snert ... ”

“Wat wil jy hê moet ek jou noem wanneer ons twee alleen is?”

Selfs in die dowwe lanternlig kan Harry sien mevrou Weasley is bloedrooi in die gesig; hy voel self ook skielik ’n warm gloed om sy ore en in sy nek af en sluk haastig nog sop en kap sy lepel aspris hard teen die sopbak.

“Molly lollie,” fluister ’n gekrenkte mevrou Weasley by die kraak aan die kant van die deur.

“Korrek,” sê meneer Weasley. “Nou kan jy my maar laat inkom.”

Mevrou Weasley maak die deur oop en daar staan haar man: ’n maer, amper-bles rooikop towenaar wat ’n horinggraambрил en ’n lang en stowwerige reismantel dra.

“Ek kan nog steeds nie verstaan hoekom ons elke keer dat jy huis toe kom daardeur moet gaan nie,” sê mevrou Weasley, steeds pienk in die gesig, terwyl sy haar man help om sy mantel uit te trek. “Ek bedoel, ’n Doodseter kon maklik die antwoord uit jou gewurg het voor hy jou hier kom na-aap het!”

“Ek weet, skat, maar dit is die Ministerie se prosedure en ek moet ’n voorbeeld stel. Hm, iets ruik lekker – uiesop?”

Meneer Weasley draai vol afwagting na die tafel.

“Harry! Ons het jou eers môreoggend verwag!”

Hulle skud hand en meneer Weasley val in die stoel langs Harry neer terwyl mevrou Weasley voor hom ook ’n bakkie sop neersit.

“Dankie, Molly. Dit was ’n moeilike aand. Een of ander swaap het Metamorfosemedaljes begin verkoop. Dra dit net om jou nek en jy kan na willekeur van voorkoms verander. ’n Honderdduisend vermommings, vir net tien Galjoene!”

“En wat gebeur regtig wanneer jy die goed dra?”

“Jy kry gewoonlik net so ’n aaklige oranje kleur, maar party mense het al vratte met tentakels oral op hul lywe gekry. Asof Sint Mungo’s nie alreeds genoeg het om te doen nie!”

“Dit klink na een van Fred en George se soort grappe,” sê mevrou Weasley versigtig. “Is jy seker –?”

“Natuurlik is ek!” sê meneer Weasley. “Die seuns sal nie nou so iets aanvang nie, nie noudat almal so desperaat vir beskerming is nie!”

“Is dit dus oor die Metamorfosemedaljes dat jy laat is?”

“Nee, ons het snuf in die neus gekry van ’n bitsige Boemerangvloek onder in Elephant Castle, maar gelukkig het die Magiese Wetstoepassingspatrolië sake al onder beheer gehad teen die tyd dat ons daar aangekom het ...”

Harry gaap agter sy hand.

“Bed toe met jou,” sê mevrou Weasley dadelik. “Ek het Fred en George se kamer vir jou reggemaak. Dis joune en net joune.”

“Hoekom? Waar’s hulle?”

“O, hulle is in Diagonaalstraat. Slaap in ’n woonstelletjie bokant hul grapwinkel omdat hulle so besig is,” sê mevrou Weasley. “Ek moet sê, ek was eers daarteen gekant, maar dit lyk of hulle nogal ’n slag met besigheid het! Kom nou, skat; jou trommel is al daarbo.”

“Nag, meneer Weasley,” sê Harry en stoot sy stoel terug. Kromskeen spring ligvoets van sy skoot af en sluip by die vertrek uit.

“Nagsê, Harry,” sê meneer Weasley.

Harry sien hoe loer mevrou Weasley na die wekker in die wasgoedmandjie terwyl hulle by die kombuis uitgaan. Al die wysers is al weer op *doodsgevaar*.

Fred en George se slaapkamer is op die tweede verdieping. Mevrou Weasley wys met haar towerstaf na ’n lamp op die bedkassie en hy gaan dadelik aan en baai die vertrek in ’n vriendelike, goue gloed. Al staan daar ’n groot pot blomme op die lessenaar voor die klein venster

kan hul soet geur nie die reuk van iets wat Harry aan buskruit herinner, verbloem nie. 'n Groot deel van die vloer staan vol ongemerkte, verseelde kartondose, en tussen hulle sien Harry sy trommel. Dit lyk of die plek tydelik as 'n stoorkamer gebruik word.

Hedwig hoe-hoe bly vir Harry van waar sy bo-op 'n groot hangkas sit en vlieg dan by die venster uit; Harry weet sy het gewag om hom te sien voor sy gaan jag. Harry sê vir mevrou Weasley nag, trek sy pajamas aan en klim in een van die beddens. Daar is iets hards in die kussingsloop. Hy voel binne-in rond en haal 'n taai pers-en-oranje lekker uit wat hy dadelik as 'n Kotsklontjie herken. Hy glimlag so op sy eentjie, rol om en is dadelik vas aan die slaap.

Sekondes later, altans só voel dit vir Harry, word hy wakker van 'n klank wat soos kanonvuur klink toe die deur oopbars. Hy kom vervaard regop, hoor hoe die gordyne oopgepluk word en voel hoe die verblindende sonlig hom in albei oë steek. Hy hou sy oë met een hand toe en soek naarstiglik met die ander een na sy bril.

“Wassit?”

“Ons het nie geweet jy's al hier nie!” sê 'n harde stem opgewonde en hy kry 'n taai klap teen die kant van sy kop.

“Moenie hom slaan, nie, Ron!” sê 'n meisie se stem verwykend.

Harry se hand vind sy bril en hy sit dit dadelik op, al is die lig so skerp dat hy in elk geval skaars kan sien. 'n Lang skaduwee doem vir 'n oomblik wasig voor hom op; hy knip sy oë en 'n grinnikende Ron Weasley kom in fokus.

“Jy oukei?”

“Meer as,” sê Harry terwyl hy sy kop vryf en teen die kussings terugsak. “En julle?”

“Nie sleg nie,” sê Ron. Hy trek 'n boks nader en gaan sit daarop “Wanneer het jy hier aangekom? Ma het ons nou eers vertel!”

“Omtrent eenuur vanoggend.”

“Was die Moggels orraait? Het hulle jou oukei behandel?”

“Selfde as gewoonlik,” sê Harry soos wat Hermione op die kant van sy bed kom sit. “Hulle het nie juis met my gepraat nie, maar ek verkies dit só. Hoe gaan dit met jou, Hermione?”

“O, goed dankie,” sê Hermione wat Harry aankyk asof hy een of ander siekte het.

Hy dink hy weet wat daaragter steek, en omdat hy nie nou oor Sirius se dood of enige ander treurige goed wil praat nie, sê hy: “Hoe laat is dit? Het ek ontbyt gemis?”

“Toemaar, Ma bring vir jou 'n skinkbord kos; sy reken jy's ondervoed,” sê Ron en rol sy oë. “So, wat gaan aan?”

“Niks. Net in my oom en tante se huis op hok.”

“Se voet!” sê Ron. “Jy’t saam met Dumbledore gaan rondloop!”

“Dit was nie só opwindend nie. Hy wou net hê ek moes hom help om ’n afgetrede onderwyser om te praat om weer te gaan skoolhou. Sy naam is Horace Slughorn.”

“O,” sê Ron en lyk teleurgesteld. “Ons dog –”

Hermione gee Ron ’n waarskuwende kyk en Ron verander blitsvinnig van deuntjie.

“– ons dog dit sou so iets wees.”

“Issit?” sê Harry geamuseerd.

“Jip ... Ja, noudat Umbridge weg is, het ons mos ’n nuwe Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-onderwyser nodig, dan nie? So, e, hoe’s hy?”

“Hy lyk bietjie soos ’n walrus en was vroeër Slytherin se hoof,” sê Harry. “Iets verkeerd, Hermione?”

Sy hou hom stip dop asof sy verwag hy gaan enige oomblik vreemde simptome ontwikkel. Hermione ruk haar vinnig reg en glimlag onoordeelkundig.

“Nee, natuurlik nie! So, e, lyk dit vir jou of Slughorn ’n goeie onderwyser gaan wees?”

“Weet nie,” sê Harry. “Maar hy kan nie erger as Umbridge wees nie, kan hy?”

“Ek weet van iemand wat erger as Umbridge is,” sê ’n stem van die deur af. Ron se jonger suster kom knorrig by die kamer in. “Haai, Harry.”

“Wat’s dit met jou?” vra Ron.

“Dis sy,” sê Ginny en plak haarself op Harry se bed neer. “Sy maak my mal.”

“Wat het sy nou weer gedoen?” vra Hermione simpatiek.

“Dis die manier waarop sy met my praat – jy sal sweer ek is net drie!”

“Ek weet,” sê Hermione en laat sak haar stem. “Sy’s so vol van haarself.”

Harry is verstom om Hermione só van mevrou Weasley te hoor praat en neem Ron allesbehalwe kwalik toe hy kwaad sê: “Kan julle twee haar nie net vir vyf sekondes uitlos nie?”

“Ja, dis reg, kom vir haar op,” kap Ginny terug. “Ons weet almal jy kan nie genoeg van haar kry nie.”

Dit is darem ’n baie snaakse ding om van Ron se ma te sê; Harry begin voel daar is iets wat hy mis en vra: “Van wie – ?”

Maar sy vraag word beantwoord nog voor hy dit kan klaarmaak. Die kamerdeur vlieg weer oop en Harry trek die beddegoed instink-

tief tot by sy ken op sodat Hermione en Ginny van die bed afgly en op die vloer beland.

Daar staan 'n jong vrou in die deur, 'n vrou wat so asemrowend mooi is dat dit skielik voel of daar niks meer lug in die kamer is nie. Sy is lank en lenig, met lang blonde hare, en dit is asof sy 'n sagte silwer gloed uitstraal. Om hierdie volmaakte prentjie af te rond, dra sy 'n swaargelaaide ontbyt-skinkbord.

"'Arry," sê sy in 'n skor stem. "Ek 'et jou gemis!"

Sy sweef oor die drumpel en mevrou Weasley verskyn vies agter haar.

"Dit was nie nodig om die skinkbord te bring nie. Ek was op die punt om dit self te doen!"

"Dis glad nie moeite nie," sê Fleur Delacour. Sy sit die skinkbord op Harry se knieë neer en buk af om hom op elke wang te soen. Hy voel die plekke waar haar mond aan hom geraak het, brand. "Ek 'et so na 'om verlang. Onthou jy my suster, Gabrielle? Sy praat nou nog van 'Arry Potter. Sy sal jou baie graag weer wil sien."

"O ... is sy ook hier?" vra Harry hees.

"Nee, nee, jou lawwe seun," sê Fleur en gee 'n tinkellaggie, "ek bedoel volgende somer wanneer ons – weet jy dan nog nie?"

Haar groot blou oë rek wyd en sy kyk verwyttend na mevrou Weasley wat sê: "Ons het nog nie sover gekom om hom te vertel nie."

Fleur draai terug na Harry en gooi haar lang silwer hare agtertoe sodat dit mevrou Weasley deur die gesig piets. "Ek en Bill gaan trou!"

"O," sê Harry beteuterd. Hy kan nie help om op te merk hoe mevrou Weasley, Hermione en Ginny doelbewus mekaar se oë vermy nie. "Sjoe. E – geluk!"

Sy buk weer oor hom af en soen hom nog 'n keer.

"Bill is op die oomblik baie besig; 'y werk baie hard en ek werk deeltjies by Gringotts om my woordeskat uit te brei. 'y 'et my vir 'n paar dae 'ier'een gebring om sy familie beter te leer ken. Ek was so bly toe ek 'oor jy kom ook – daar is nie veel om 'ier te doen nie, behalwe as jy van koskook en 'oenders 'ou! Wel, geniet jou ontbyt, 'Arry!"

Met hierdie woorde draai sy grasieus om, loop ligvoets by die kamer uit en maak die deur sag agter haar toe.

Mevrou Weasley maak 'n geluid wat klink soos "Tja!"

"Ma haat haar," sê Ginny sag.

"Ek haat haar nie!" fluister mevrou Weasley vies. "Ek dink net hulle't te gou verloof geraak, dis al!"

“Hulle ken mekaar al ’n jaar,” sê Ron, wat asof bedwelmd na die toe deur staar.

“Wel, dis nie baie lank nie! Ek weet natuurlik hoe dit gebeur het. Dis oor al die onsekerheid met Jy-Weet-Wie wat terug is. Mense dink hulle gaan môre dalk dood wees, dus hulle neem oorhaastig besluite waaroor hulle normaalweg eers baie mooi sou nagedink het. Dit was dieselfde laas toe hy so magtig was. Paartjies het links en regs afgehaak —”

“Paartjies soos Ma en Pa,” sê Ginny giggelrig.

“Ja, wel, ek en jou pa is vir mekaar gemaak, so hoekom moes ons nog gewag het?” sê mevrou Weasley. “Maar Bill en Fleur ... wel ... Wat het hulle nou eintlik gemeen? Hy’s ’n hardwerkende, plat-op-die-aarde soort mens en sy’s —”

“’n Koei,” sê Ginny en knik. “Maar Bill is nie so plat op die aarde nie. Hy’s ’n vloekbreker, onthou, en hy hou van avontuur, ’n bietjie glans in sy lewe ... Ek dink dis hoekom hy vir Slymbol gegaan het.”

“Hou op om haar só te noem, Ginny,” sê mevrou Weasley skerp terwyl Harry en Hermione lag. “Wel, ek moet aan die gang kom ... Eet jou eiers terwyl hulle nog warm is, Harry.”

Sy lyk afgemat toe sy by die kamer uit loop. Ron lyk nog steeds bedwelmd; hy skud sy kop soos ’n hond wat water uit sy ore probeer kry.

“Is jy nog nie gewoond aan haar nou dat julle in dieselfde huis bly nie?” vra Harry.

“Wel, so half,” sê Ron, “maar as sy so skielik op ’n mens afkom ...”

“Dis pateties,” sê Hermione woedend en gee haastig van Ron af pad. Sy loop tot by die muur en draai dan arms gevou na hom toe om.

“Jy wil haar tog seker nie vir altyd hier hê nie?” vra Ginny verstom vir Ron. Hy haal net sy skouers op en sy sê: “Wel, ek wed jou Ma gaan ’n stokkie daarvoor steek, as sy kan.”

“Hoe gaan sy dit regkry?” wil Harry weet.

“Sy probeer aanhoudend vir Tonks oornooi vir ete. Ek dink sy hoop Bill sal eerder vir haar val. Ek hoop rêrig so; ek sal haar baie eerder in ons familie wil hê.”

“Hoop maar lekker,” sê Ron sarkasties. “Luister, g’n ou wie se kop reg aangeskroef is, sal twee keer na Tonks kyk met Fleur naby nie. Ek bedoel, Tonks is nie lelik wanneer sy nie simpel goed met haar hare en haar neus aanvang nie, maar —”

“Sy’s honderd keer gawer as Slymbol,” onderbreek Ginny hom.

“En sy’s intelligenter; sy’s ’n Auror!” sê Hermione uit die hoek uit.

“Fleur is nie dom nie; sy was goed genoeg om vir die Drietowe-naarstoernooi in te skryf,” sê Harry.

“Nie jy ook nie!” sê Hermione bitter.

“Jy hou natuurlik van die manier waarop Fleur ‘Arry’ sê, nè?” vra Ginny minagtend.

“Nee,” sê Harry en wens hy het eerder stilgebly. “Ek het net gesê dat Slymbol – ek bedoel, Fleur –”

“Ek sal baie eerder vir Tonks in die familie wil hê,” sê Ginny weer. “Sy’s ten minste snaaks.”

“Sy’s nie deesdae meer so snaaks nie,” sê Ron. “Elke keer dat ek haar sien, lyk sy al hoe meer na Myrtle Martelgat.”

“Dis onregverdig,” snou Hermione hom toe. “Sy is nog nie oor wat gebeur het nie ... jy weet ... Ek bedoel, hy was haar neef!”

Harry se hart sink in sy skoene. Hulle is by Sirius. Hy tel sy vurk op en begin die roereier in sy mond ingaffel met die hoop dat hy nie genooi sal word om aan hierdie deel van die gesprek deel te neem nie.

“Tonks en Sirius het mekaar skaars geken!” sê Ron. “Sirius was die helfte van haar lewe in Azkaban en voor dit het hul families mekaar skaars geken –”

“Dis nie die punt nie,” sê Hermione. “Sy dink dis haar skuld dat hy dood is!”

“Wat laat haar só dink?” vra Harry ten spyte van homself.

“Wel, sy het teen Bellatrix Lestrange geveg, onthou? Ek dink sy voel as sy met haar klaargespeel het, sou Bellatrix Sirius nie kon doodgemaak het nie.”

“Dis simpel,” sê Ron.

“Oorlewendes voel baie keer skuldig dat hulle nie dood is nie,” sê Hermione. “Ek weet Lupin het al met haar probeer praat, maar sy’s regtig baie af. Sy sukkel selfs met haar Metamorfosering!”

“Met haar – ?”

“Sy kan haar voorkoms nie meer soos eers verander nie,” verduidelik Hermione. “Ek dink die skok het haar kragte beïnvloed, of iets.”

“Ek het nie geweet dit kan gebeur nie,” sê Harry.

“Ek ook nie,” sê Hermione, “maar ek veronderstel as jy regtig depressief is ...”

Die deur gaan weer oop en mevrou Weasley steek haar kop in.

“Ginny,” fluister sy, “kom af ondertoe en help my met middagete.”

“Ek gesels nog met hulle!” sê Ginny ontstoke.

“Nou dadelik!” sê mevrou Weasley en verdwyn weer.

“Sy wil my net daar hê sodat sy nie alleen saam met Symbol hoef te wees nie!” sê Ginny briesend. Sy gooi haar lang rooi hare agtertoe net soos wat Fleur gedoen het en stap pronkerig soos ’n ballerina met haar arms omhoof deur toe.

“Julle klomp beter ook gou ondertoe kom,” sê sy en gaan uit.

Harry gebruik die tydelike stilte om nog van sy ontbyt te eet. Hermione krap in Fred en George se bokse rond, maar elke nou en dan loer sy onderlangs vir Harry. Ron het intussen van Harry se roosterbrood begin eet; hy staan nog steeds droomverlore na die deur.

“Wat’s dit?” vra Hermione uiteindelik en hou iets op wat soos ’n klein teleskoop lyk.

“Weet nie,” sê Ron, “maar as Fred en George dit hier gelos het, is dit seker nog nie reg vir die grapwinkel nie, so wees versigtig.”

“Jou ma sê die winkel doen goed,” sê Harry. “Sy sê Fred en George het ’n regte slag met besigheid.”

“’n Hengse slag,” sê Ron. “Die Galjoene rol in! Ek kan nie wag om die plek te sien nie. Ons was nog nie Diagonaalstraat toe nie, want Ma sê Pa moet by wees vir ekstra sekuriteit en hy’s baie besig by die werk, maar dit klink na ’n ongelooflike plek.”

“En wat van Percy?” vra Harry. Die derde oudste Weasley-broer het ’n uitval met die familie gehad. “Praat hy al weer met jou ma en pa?”

“Nee,” sê Ron.

“Maar hy weet jou pa was toe heeltyd reg oor Voldemort wat teruggekom het —”

“Dumbledore sê dis vir mense makliker om ander te vergewe as hulle verkeerd was as wanneer hulle reg was,” sê Hermione. “Ek het hom dit vir jou ma hoor sê, Ron.”

“Klink soos die soort mal ding wat Dumbledore sal kwytraak,” se Ron.

“Hy gaan vanjaar vir my privaat lesse gee,” sê Harry gesellig.

Ron verstik in sy roosterbrood en Hermione snak na haar asem.

“En jy hou dit stil?” vra Ron.

“Ek het nou eers daarvan onthou,” sê Harry eerlik. “Hy het my laas nag gesê, in julle besemskuur.”

“Jissou ... privaat klasse by Dumbledore!” sê Ron en lyk beïndruk. “Ek wonder hoekom hy ...?”

Sy stem sterf weg. Harry sien hoe hy en Hermione vir mekaar kyk. Harry sit sy mes en vurk neer; sy hart klop nogal vinnig vir iemand wat bloot in die bed sit. Dumbledore het gesê hy moet dit doen ... hoekom nie nou nie? Hy kyk stip na die vurk wat blink in die sonlig wat oor sy skoot instroom en sê: “Ek weet nie presies hoekom hy vir my lesse gaan gee nie, maar ek dink dis oor die profesie.”

Nie Ron of Hermione sê iets nie. Dit lyk vir Harry of hulle al twee gevries het. Hy gaan aan terwyl hy nog steeds net na sy vurk kyk: “Die een wat hulle by die Ministerie probeer steel het,” gaan hy voort.

“Maar niemand weet wat dit gesê het nie,” sê Hermione vinnig. “Dis verbrysel.”

“Alhoewel die *Daaglikse Profeet* sê –” begin Ron, maar Hermione sê: “Sjuut!”

“Die *Profeet* is reg,” sê Harry en span al sy wilskrag in om vir hulle te kyk. Hermione lyk bang en Ron is verstom. “Daardie glasbal wat gebreek het, was nie die enigste rekord van die profesie nie. Ek het die hele storie in Dumbledore se kantoor gehoor; hy is die een aan wie die profesie openbaar gemaak is, dus hy kon my vertel. Volgens die profesie,” sê Harry en asem diep in, “lyk dit of ek die een is wat met Voldemort moet afreken ... ten minste, dit het gesê nie een van ons kan lewe as die ander een oorleef nie.”

Die drie staar vir ’n oomblik lank in stilte na mekaar. Dan is daar ’n harde knal en Hermione verdwyn agter ’n wolk swart rook.

“Hermione!” roep Harry en Ron; die ontbytskinkbord gly met ’n gekletter op die vloer neer.

Hermione verskyn hoesende uit die rookwalm met die teleskoop in haar hand vasgeklem en ’n helderpers blouoog.

“Ek het hom gedruk en hy – hy’t my met die vuus geslaan!” snak sy.

En sowaar, hulle sien nou ’n klein vuisie wat aan ’n lang veer by die teleskoop se punt uithang.

“Toemaar,” sê Ron terwyl hy hard probeer om nie te lag nie. “Ma sal dit vir jou regdokter. Sy’s goed met sulke klein ongelukkies –”

“Dit kan wag tot later!” sê Hermione haastig. “Harry, o Harry ...”

Sy kom sit weer op die rand van sy bed.

“Ons het gewonder ná ons van die Ministerie af teruggekom het ... Ons wou natuurlik niks vir jou sê nie, maar uit wat Lucius Malfoy van die profesie gesê het, dat dit oor jou en Voldemort gaan, het ons afgelei dis dalk so iets ... o, Harry ...” Sy staar na hom en fluister dan: “Is jy bang?”

“Nie so baie soos eers nie,” sê Harry. “Toe ek dit die eerste keer hoor, was ek ... maar nou is dit asof ek altyd geweet het ek sal op die ou end teen hom te staan kom ...”

“Toe ons hoor Dumbledore gaan jou persoonlik haal, het ons gedink hy gaan seker vir jou iets van die profesie vertel of jou iets daaroor wys,” sê Ron gretig. “En ons was soort van reg, nè? Hy sal nie vir jou lesse gee as hy dink jy gaan dit nie maak nie. Hy sal nie sy tyd so mors nie – hy moet dink jy’t ’n kans!”

“Dis waar,” sê Hermione. “Ek wonder wat gaan hy jou leer, Harry? Seker baie gevorderde verdedigingstoorkunsies ... kragtige teenvloeke ... antidoepas ...”

Harry luister nie eintlik nie. Daar vloei 'n warmte wat niks met die sonlig te doen het nie deur hom, en die benoude gevoel op sy bors begin weggaan. Hy weet Ron en Hermione is meer geskok as wat hulle voorgee, maar die blote feit dat hulle nog steeds aan weerskante van hom is en hom probeer gerusstel en nie wegdeins van hom asof hy besmet of gevaarlik is nie, is meer werd as wat hy ooit vir hulle sal kan verduidelik.

“... en algemene ontwykingspreuke,” sluit Hermione af. “Wel, jy weet ten minste van een les wat jy vanjaar gaan hê, en dis meer as wat ek en Ron weet. Ek wonder wanneer gaan ons UIL-uitslae kom?”

“Kan nie meer lank wees nie; dis nou al 'n maand,” sê Ron.

“Wag bietjie,” sê Harry wat skielik nog iets van laas nag se gesprek onthou. “Ek dink Dumbledore het gesê ons UIL-uitslae kom vandag!”

“Vandag?” gil Hermione. “Vandag? Maar hoekom het jy nie – o, hemel ... Jy moes ons gesê het –”

Sy spring van die bed af. “Ek gaan gou kyk of hier al enige uile is ...”

Maar toe Harry tien minute later aangetrek en met sy leë ontbyt-skinkbord onder kom, sit Hermione ontsteld oor iets anders by die kombuistafel. Mevrou Weasley doen haar bes om Hermione minder soos 'n halwe panda te laat lyk.

“Ek kry dit net nie weg nie,” sê mevrou Weasley besorg. Sy staan by Hermione met haar towerstaf in die hand en 'n eksemplaar van *Handleiding vir Huisgenesers* wat by “Snye, kneus- en skaafplekke” oop is. “Ek verstaan dit nie; dit het nog altyd gewerk.”

“Dis natuurlik Fred en George se idee van 'n grap. Hulle't seker gemaak mens kan dit nie afkry nie,” sê Ginny.

“Maar dit moet afkom!” gil Hermione. “Ek kan nie vir ewig só lyk nie!”

“Jy sal nie, skat. Ons sal 'n teenmiddel kry, jy sal sien,” paai mevrou Weasley.

“Bill het my vertel van Fred en George wat so grappe maak,” sê Fleur en glimlag onverstoord.

“Ja, en ek kan skaars asemhaal, so lekker lag ek,” hap Hermione na haar.

Sy spring op en begin om en om in die kombuis loop terwyl sy haar vingers inmekaar vleg.

“Mevrou Weasley, is u dood-, doodseker daar het nog nie vandooggend enige uile gekom nie?”

“Ja, skat. Ek sou mos agtergekom het,” sê mevrou Weasley guldig. “Maar dis skaars nege-uur; daar is nog baie tyd ...”

“Ek weet ek het sleg gedoen in Antieke Runes,” mompel Hermione koorsagtig. “Ek het ten minste een ding heeltemal verkeerd vertaal. En my Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-prakties was ’n ramp. En ek het eers gedink ek het goed gevaar in Transfigurasie, maar nou dat ek weer daaroor dink –”

“Hermione, bly nou stil; jy’s nie die enigste een wat *panic* nie!” blaf Ron. “En wanneer jy dan vir al elf Uile ’n Uitstekend kry ...”

“Nee, nee, nee!” sê Hermione en haar hande fladder histories rond. “Ek weet ek het alles gedop!”

“Wat gebeur as ons dop?” vra Harry vir die hele vertrek, maar dit is weer Hermione wat antwoord.

“Dan moet ons ons opsies met ons Huishoof bespreek. Ek het vir professor McGonagall gevra, einde laas kwartaal.”

Harry se maag gee ’n draai. Hy wens hy het minder ontbyt geëet.

“By Beauxbatons,” sê Fleur selfvoldaan, “doen ons dinge anders. En ek dink ons manier is beter. Ons doen ons eksamen eers ná ses jaar se studie, nie vyf nie, en dan –”

’n Gil verswelg Fleur se woorde. Hermione wys na buite die kombuisvenster. Daar is drie swart spikkels in die lug, en hulle word al hoe groter.

“Dis definitief uile,” sê Ron hees. Hy spring op en gaan staan langs Hermione by die venster.

“Daar’s drie van hulle,” sê Harry en kom staan haastig aan haar ander kant.

“Een vir elkeen van ons,” fluister Hermione angsbevange. “O nee ... o nee ... o nee ...”

Sy gryp Harry en Ron styf aan hul elmboë vas.

Die uile vlieg reguit na Die Konynenes. Dit is drie bosuile en soos hulle met die paadjie langs na die huis toe vlieg, word dit duidelik dat elkeen ’n groot, vierkantige koevert dra.

“O nee!” kerm Hermione.

Mevrou Weasley druk verby hulle en maak die kombuisvenster oop. Een, twee, drie en die uile kom ingesweef en land in ’n netjiese ry op die tafel. Al drie van hulle lig hul regterpote.

Harry beweeg vorentoe. Die brief wat aan hom geadresseer is, is aan die uil in die middel se poot vasgebind. Hy maak dit los met dom vingers. Links van hom probeer Ron sy eie uitslae losmaak en regs van hom bewe Hermione se hande so erg dat haar uil die **rukings** oor sy hele lyf kry.

Niemand in die kombuis sê ’n woord nie. Harry kry uiteindelik

sy koevert los. Hy skeur dit haastig oop en vou die perkament binne-in oop.

GEWONE TOORWERKVLAK UITSLAE

Slaagsimbole:	Uitstekend (U)	Druipsimbole: Swak (S)
	Oortref Verwagtinge (O)	Vrot (V)
	Aanvaarbaar (A)	Trol (T)

HARRY JAMES POTTER HET BEHAAL:

Sterrekunde:	A
Versorging van Magiese Kreature:	O
Towerspreuke:	O
Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste:	U
Voorspellings:	S
Kruiekunde:	O
Geskiedenis van Towerkuns:	V
Towerdrankies:	O
Transfigurasië:	O

Harry lees die perkament 'n paar keer deur, en elke keer haal hy nóg 'n bietjie makliker asem. Dis glad nie te sleg nie: Hy het heeltyd geweet hy sal Voorspellings druipe en hy het nie 'n kans gestaan om Geskiedenis van Towerkuns deur te kom nie aangesien hy halfpad deur die eksamen ineengestort het, maar hy is al die ander vakke deur! Hy beweeg sy vinger met die simbole af ... Hy het goed gedoen in Transfigurasië en Kruiekunde, en hy het selfs 'n Oortref Verwagtinge vir Towerdrankies gekry! Maar die beste van alles is sy Uitstekend vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste!

Hy kyk om. Hermione staan met haar rug na hom, haar kop vooroor gebuig, maar Ron lyk verheug.

“Ek het net Voorspellings en Geskiedenis van Towerkuns gedop, maar dit traak my nie,” sê hy opgewonde vir Harry. “Dê – kom ons ruil om –”

Harry kyk na Ron se simbole: daar is nêrens 'n Uitstekend nie ...

“Ek het geweet jy gaan tops wees in Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste,” sê Ron en gee Harry speels 'n vuishou teen die skouer. “Ons het orraait gedoen, nè?”

“Mooi so!” sê mevrou Weasley trots en krap Ron se hare deurmekaar. “Sewe UILE – dis meer as wat Fred en George saam gekry het!”

“Hermione?” vra Ginny versigtig, want Hermione het nog steeds nie omgedraai nie. “Hoe het jy gedoen?”

“Ek – nie sleg nie,” sê Hermione in ’n klein stemmetjie.

“Aag, nonsens,” sê Ron. Hy loop na haar toe en pluk die uitslae uit haar hand. “Jip – nege Uitstekends en een Oortref Verwagtinge vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste. Hy kyk haar half geamuseerd en half geïrriteerd aan. “Jy’s so wragtig teleurgesteld, nè?”

Hermione skud haar kop, maar Harry lag.

“Wel, ons is nou OTT-studente!” grinnik Ron. “Ma, is daar nog worsies?”

Harry kyk weer na sy uitslae. Dit is so goed soos wat hy kon hoop dit sou wees. Hy voel net een klein stekie van teleurstelling ... Dit is die einde van sy droom om ’n Auror te word. Hy het nie goed genoeg in Towerdrankies gedoen nie. Hy het heeltyd geweet hy sou nie, maar hy voel nogtans half naar op sy maag terwyl hy na daardie klein swart O kyk.

Dit is eintlik vreemd. Dit was ’n Doodseter in vermomming wat eerste vir Harry gesê het hy sal ’n goeie Auror uitmaak, maar om die een of ander rede het die idee by hom posgevat en hy kon daarna aan niks anders dink wat hy graag sou wou wees nie. Wat meer is, dit het gevoel na die regte rigting vir hom nadat hy die profesie ’n maand gelede gehoor het ... *Nie een van die twee kan leef terwyl die ander een oorleef nie* ... Sou hy nie mos juis die profesie kon nakom en vir homself die beste kans op oorlewing gee deur aan te sluit by daardie hoogs opgeleide towenaars wie se werk dit is om Voldemort op te spoor en dood te maak nie?

CHAPTER SIX



DRACO'S DETOUR

Harry remained within the confines of the Burrow's garden over the next few weeks. He spent most of his days playing two-a-side Quidditch in the Weasleys' orchard (he and Hermione against Ron and Ginny; Hermione was dreadful and Ginny good, so they were reasonably well matched) and his evenings eating triple helpings of everything Mrs. Weasley put in front of him.

It would have been a happy, peaceful holiday had it not been for the stories of disappearances, odd accidents, even of deaths now appearing almost daily in the *Prophet*. Sometimes Bill and Mr. Weasley brought home news before it even reached the paper. To

Mrs. Weasley's displeasure, Harry's sixteenth birthday celebrations were marred by grisly tidings brought to the party by Remus Lupin, who was looking gaunt and grim, his brown hair streaked liberally with gray, his clothes more ragged and patched than ever.

"There have been another couple of dementor attacks," he announced, as Mrs. Weasley passed him a large slice of birthday cake. "And they've found Igor Karkaroff's body in a shack up north. The Dark Mark had been set over it — well, frankly, I'm surprised he stayed alive for even a year after deserting the Death Eaters; Sirius's brother, Regulus, only managed a few days as far as I can remember."

"Yes, well," said Mrs. Weasley, frowning, "perhaps we should talk about something diff —"

"Did you hear about Florean Fortescue, Remus?" asked Bill, who was being plied with wine by Fleur. "The man who ran —"

"— the ice-cream place in Diagon Alley?" Harry interrupted, with an unpleasant, hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach. "He used to give me free ice creams. What's happened to him?"

"Dragged off, by the look of his place."

"Why?" asked Ron, while Mrs. Weasley pointedly glared at Bill.

"Who knows? He must've upset them somehow. He was a good man, Florean."

"Talking of Diagon Alley," said Mr. Weasley, "looks like Ollivander's gone too."

"The wandmaker?" said Ginny, looking startled.

"That's the one. Shop's empty. No sign of a struggle. No one knows whether he left voluntarily or was kidnapped."

“But wands — what’ll people do for wands?”

“They’ll make do with other makers,” said Lupin. “But Ollivander was the best, and if the other side have got him it’s not so good for us.”

The day after this rather gloomy birthday tea, their letters and booklists arrived from Hogwarts. Harry’s included a surprise: He had been made Quidditch Captain.

“That gives you equal status with prefects!” cried Hermione happily. “You can use our special bathroom now and everything!”

“Wow, I remember when Charlie wore one of these,” said Ron, examining the badge with glee. “Harry, this is so cool, you’re my Captain — if you let me back on the team, I suppose, ha ha. . . .”

“Well, I don’t suppose we can put off a trip to Diagon Alley much longer now you’ve got these,” sighed Mrs. Weasley, looking down Ron’s booklist. “We’ll go on Saturday as long as your father doesn’t have to go into work again. I’m not going there without him.”

“Mum, d’you honestly think You-Know-Who’s going to be hiding behind a bookshelf in Flourish and Blotts?” sniggered Ron.

“Fortescue and Ollivander went on holiday, did they?” said Mrs. Weasley, firing up at once. “If you think security’s a laughing matter you can stay behind and I’ll get your things myself —”

“No, I wanna come, I want to see Fred and George’s shop!” said Ron hastily.

“Then you just buck up your ideas, young man, before I decide you’re too immature to come with us!” said Mrs. Weasley angrily, snatching up her clock, all nine hands of which were still pointing at “mortal peril,” and balancing it on top of a pile of just-laundered

towels. “And that goes for returning to Hogwarts as well!”

Ron turned to stare incredulously at Harry as his mother hoisted the laundry basket and the teetering clock into her arms and stormed out of the room.

“Blimey . . . you can’t even make a joke round here anymore. . . .”

But Ron was careful not to be flippant about Voldemort over the next few days. Saturday dawned without any more outbursts from Mrs. Weasley, though she seemed very tense at breakfast. Bill, who would be staying at home with Fleur (much to Hermione and Ginny’s pleasure), passed a full money bag across the table to Harry.

“Where’s mine?” demanded Ron at once, his eyes wide.

“That’s already Harry’s, idiot,” said Bill. “I got it out of your vault for you, Harry, because it’s taking about five hours for the public to get to their gold at the moment, the goblins have tightened security so much. Two days ago Arkie Philpott had a Probity Probe stuck up his . . . Well, trust me, this way’s easier.”

“Thanks, Bill,” said Harry, pocketing his gold.

“E is always so thoughtful,” purred Fleur adoringly, stroking Bill’s nose. Ginny mimed vomiting into her cereal behind Fleur. Harry choked over his cornflakes, and Ron thumped him on the back.

It was an overcast, murky day. One of the special Ministry of Magic cars, in which Harry had ridden once before, was awaiting them in the front yard when they emerged from the house, pulling on their cloaks.

“It’s good Dad can get us these again,” said Ron appreciatively, stretching luxuriously as the car moved smoothly away from the Burrow, Bill and Fleur waving from the kitchen window. He, Harry,

Hermione, and Ginny were all sitting in roomy comfort in the wide backseat.

“Don’t get used to it, it’s only because of Harry,” said Mr. Weasley over his shoulder. He and Mrs. Weasley were in front with the Ministry driver; the front passenger seat had obligingly stretched into what resembled a two-seater sofa. “He’s been given top-grade security status. And we’ll be joining up with additional security at the Leaky Cauldron too.”

Harry said nothing; he did not much fancy doing his shopping while surrounded by a battalion of Aurors. He had stowed his Invisibility Cloak in his backpack and felt that, if that was good enough for Dumbledore, it ought to be good enough for the Ministry, though now he came to think of it, he was not sure the Ministry knew about his Cloak.

“Here you are, then,” said the driver, a surprisingly short while later, speaking for the first time as he slowed in Charing Cross Road and stopped outside the Leaky Cauldron. “I’m to wait for you, any idea how long you’ll be?”

“A couple of hours, I expect,” said Mr. Weasley. “Ah, good, he’s here!”

Harry imitated Mr. Weasley and peered through the window; his heart leapt. There were no Aurors waiting outside the inn, but instead the gigantic, black-bearded form of Rubeus Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, wearing a long beaverskin coat, beaming at the sight of Harry’s face and oblivious to the startled stares of passing Muggles.

“Harry!” he boomed, sweeping Harry into a bone-crushing hug the moment Harry had stepped out of the car. “Buckbeak —

Witherwings, I mean — yeh should see him, Harry, he's so happy ter be back in the open air —”

“Glad he's pleased,” said Harry, grinning as he massaged his ribs. “We didn't know ‘security’ meant you!”

“I know, jus' like old times, innit? See, the Ministry wanted ter send a bunch o' Aurors, but Dumbledore said I'd do,” said Hagrid proudly, throwing out his chest and tucking his thumbs into his pockets. “Let's get goin' then — after yeh, Molly, Arthur —”

The Leaky Cauldron was, for the first time in Harry's memory, completely empty. Only Tom the landlord, wizened and toothless, remained of the old crowd. He looked up hopefully as they entered, but before he could speak, Hagrid said importantly, “Jus' passin' through today, Tom, sure yeh understand, Hogwarts business, yeh know.”

Tom nodded gloomily and returned to wiping glasses; Harry, Hermione, Hagrid, and the Weasleys walked through the bar and out into the chilly little courtyard at the back where the dustbins stood. Hagrid raised his pink umbrella and rapped a certain brick in the wall, which opened at once to form an archway onto a winding cobbled street. They stepped through the entrance and paused, looking around.

Diagon Alley had changed. The colorful, glittering window displays of spellbooks, potion ingredients, and cauldrons were lost to view, hidden behind the large Ministry of Magic posters that had been pasted over them. Most of these somber purple posters carried blown-up versions of the security advice on the Ministry pamphlets that had been sent out over the summer, but others bore moving black-

and-white photographs of Death Eaters known to be on the loose. Bellatrix Lestrange was sneering from the front of the nearest apothecary. A few windows were boarded up, including those of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor. On the other hand, a number of shabby-looking stalls had sprung up along the street. The nearest one, which had been erected outside Flourish and Blotts, under a striped, stained awning, had a cardboard sign pinned to its front:

AMULETS

Effective Against Werewolves, Dementors, and Inferi

A seedy-looking little wizard was rattling armfuls of silver symbols on chains at passersby.

"One for your little girl, madam?" he called at Mrs. Weasley as they passed, leering at Ginny. "Protect her pretty neck?"

"If I were on duty . . ." said Mr. Weasley, glaring angrily at the amulet seller.

"Yes, but don't go arresting anyone now, dear, we're in a hurry," said Mrs. Weasley, nervously consulting a list. "I think we'd better do Madam Malkin's first, Hermione wants new dress robes, and Ron's showing much too much ankle in his school robes, and you must need new ones too, Harry, you've grown so much — come on, everyone —"

"Molly, it doesn't make sense for all of us to go to Madam Malkin's," said Mr. Weasley. "Why don't those three go with Hagrid, and we can go to Flourish and Blotts and get everyone's schoolbooks?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Weasley anxiously, clearly torn between

a desire to finish the shopping quickly and the wish to stick together in a pack. “Hagrid, do you think — ?”

“Don’ fret, they’ll be fine with me, Molly,” said Hagrid soothingly, waving an airy hand the size of a dustbin lid. Mrs. Weasley did not look entirely convinced, but allowed the separation, scurrying off toward Flourish and Blotts with her husband and Ginny while Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Hagrid set off for Madam Malkin’s.

Harry noticed that many of the people who passed them had the same harried, anxious look as Mrs. Weasley, and that nobody was stopping to talk anymore; the shoppers stayed together in their own tightly knit groups, moving intently about their business. Nobody seemed to be shopping alone.

“Migh’ be a bit of a squeeze in there with all of us,” said Hagrid, stopping outside Madam Malkin’s and bending down to peer through the window. “I’ll stand guard outside, all right?”

So Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the little shop together. It appeared, at first glance, to be empty, but no sooner had the door swung shut behind them than they heard a familiar voice issuing from behind a rack of dress robes in spangled green and blue.

“. . . not a child, in case you haven’t noticed, Mother. I am perfectly capable of doing my shopping *alone*.”

There was a clucking noise and a voice Harry recognized as that of Madam Malkin, the owner, said, “Now, dear, your mother’s quite right, none of us is supposed to go wandering around on our own anymore, it’s nothing to do with being a child —”

“Watch where you’re sticking that pin, will you!”

A teenage boy with a pale, pointed face and white-blond hair

appeared from behind the rack, wearing a handsome set of dark green robes that glittered with pins around the hem and the edges of the sleeves. He strode to the mirror and examined himself; it was a few moments before he noticed Harry, Ron, and Hermione reflected over his shoulder. His light gray eyes narrowed.

“If you’re wondering what the smell is, Mother, a Mudblood just walked in,” said Draco Malfoy.

“I don’t think there’s any need for language like that!” said Madam Malkin, scurrying out from behind the clothes rack holding a tape measure and a wand. “And I don’t want wands drawn in my shop either!” she added hastily, for a glance toward the door had shown her Harry and Ron both standing there with their wands out and pointing at Malfoy. Hermione, who was standing slightly behind them, whispered, “No, don’t, honestly, it’s not worth it. . . .”

“Yeah, like you’d dare do magic out of school,” sneered Malfoy. “Who blacked your eye, Granger? I want to send them flowers.”

“That’s quite enough!” said Madam Malkin sharply, looking over her shoulder for support. “Madam — please —”

Narcissa Malfoy strolled out from behind the clothes rack.

“Put those away,” she said coldly to Harry and Ron. “If you attack my son again, I shall ensure that it is the last thing you ever do.”

“Really?” said Harry, taking a step forward and gazing into the smoothly arrogant face that, for all its pallor, still resembled her sister’s. He was as tall as she was now. “Going to get a few Death Eater pals to do us in, are you?”

Madam Malkin squealed and clutched at her heart.

“Really, you shouldn’t accuse — dangerous thing to say — wands

away, please!”

But Harry did not lower his wand. Narcissa Malfoy smiled unpleasantly.

“I see that being Dumbledore’s favorite has given you a false sense of security, Harry Potter. But Dumbledore won’t always be there to protect you.”

Harry looked mockingly all around the shop. “Wow . . . look at that . . . he’s not here now! So why not have a go? They might be able to find you a double cell in Azkaban with your loser of a husband!”

Malfoy made an angry movement toward Harry, but stumbled over his overlong robe. Ron laughed loudly.

“Don’t you dare talk to my mother like that, Potter!” Malfoy snarled.

“It’s all right, Draco,” said Narcissa, restraining him with her thin white fingers upon his shoulder. “I expect Potter will be reunited with dear Sirius before I am reunited with Lucius.”

Harry raised his wand higher.

“Harry, no!” moaned Hermione, grabbing his arm and attempting to push it down by his side. “Think. . . . You mustn’t. . . . You’ll be in such trouble. . . .”

Madam Malkin dithered for a moment on the spot, then seemed to decide to act as though nothing was happening in the hope that it wouldn’t. She bent toward Malfoy, who was still glaring at Harry.

“I think this left sleeve could come up a little bit more, dear, let me just —”

“Ouch!” bellowed Malfoy, slapping her hand away. “Watch where you’re putting your pins, woman! Mother — I don’t think I want these

anymore —”

He pulled the robes over his head and threw them onto the floor at Madam Malkin’s feet.

“You’re right, Draco,” said Narcissa, with a contemptuous glance at Hermione, “now I know the kind of scum that shops here. . . . We’ll do better at Twilfitt and Tatting’s.”

And with that, the pair of them strode out of the shop, Malfoy taking care to bang as hard as he could into Ron on the way out.

“Well, *really!*” said Madam Malkin, snatching up the fallen robes and moving the tip of her wand over them like a vacuum cleaner, so that it removed all the dust.

She was distracted all through the fitting of Ron’s and Harry’s new robes, tried to sell Hermione wizard’s dress robes instead of witch’s, and when she finally bowed them out of the shop it was with an air of being glad to see the back of them.

“Got ev’rything?” asked Hagrid brightly when they reappeared at his side.

“Just about,” said Harry. “Did you see the Malfoys?”

“Yeah,” said Hagrid, unconcerned. “Bu’ they wouldn’ dare make trouble in the middle o’ Diagon Alley, Harry. Don’ worry abou’ them.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged looks, but before they could disabuse Hagrid of this comfortable notion, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ginny appeared, all clutching heavy packages of books.

“Everyone all right?” said Mrs. Weasley. “Got your robes? Right then, we can pop in at the Apothecary and Eeylops on the way to Fred and George’s — stick close, now. . . .”

Neither Harry nor Ron bought any ingredients at the Apothecary, seeing that they were no longer studying Potions, but both bought large boxes of owl nuts for Hedwig and Pigwidgeon at Eeylops Owl Emporium. Then, with Mrs. Weasley checking her watch every minute or so, they headed farther along the street in search of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, the joke shop run by Fred and George.

"We really haven't got too long," Mrs. Weasley said. "So we'll just have a quick look around and then back to the car. We must be close, that's number ninety-two . . . ninety-four . . ."

"*Whoa,*" said Ron, stopping in his tracks.

Set against the dull, poster-muffled shop fronts around them, Fred and George's windows hit the eye like a firework display. Casual passersby were looking back over their shoulders at the windows, and a few rather stunned-looking people had actually come to a halt, transfixed. The left-hand window was dazzlingly full of an assortment of goods that revolved, popped, flashed, bounced, and shrieked; Harry's eyes began to water just looking at it. The right-hand window was covered with a gigantic poster, purple like those of the Ministry, but emblazoned with flashing yellow letters:

**WHY ARE YOU WORRYING ABOUT YOU-KNOW-WHO?
YOU SHOULD BE WORRYING ABOUT U-NO-POO —
THE CONSTIPATION SENSATION THAT'S GRIPPING THE
NATION!**

Harry started to laugh. He heard a weak sort of moan beside him and looked around to see Mrs. Weasley gazing, dumbfounded, at the poster. Her lips moved silently, mouthing the name "U-No-Poo."

“They’ll be murdered in their beds!” she whispered.

“No they won’t!” said Ron, who, like Harry, was laughing. “This is brilliant!”

And he and Harry led the way into the shop. It was packed with customers; Harry could not get near the shelves. He stared around, looking up at the boxes piled to the ceiling: Here were the Skiving Snackboxes that the twins had perfected during their last, unfinished year at Hogwarts; Harry noticed that the Nosebleed Nougat was most popular, with only one battered box left on the shelf. There were bins full of trick wands, the cheapest merely turning into rubber chickens or pairs of briefs when waved, the most expensive beating the unwary user around the head and neck, and boxes of quills, which came in Self-Inking, Spell-Checking, and Smart-Answer varieties. A space cleared in the crowd, and Harry pushed his way toward the counter, where a gaggle of delighted ten-year-olds was watching a tiny little wooden man slowly ascending the steps to a real set of gallows, both perched on a box that read: REUSABLE HANGMAN — SPELL IT OR HE’LL SWING!

““Patented Daydream Charms . . .””

Hermione had managed to squeeze through to a large display near the counter and was reading the information on the back of a box bearing a highly colored picture of a handsome youth and a swooning girl who were standing on the deck of a pirate ship.

““One simple incantation and you will enter a top-quality, highly realistic, thirty-minute daydream, easy to fit into the average school lesson and virtually undetectable (side effects include vacant expression and minor drooling). Not for sale to under-sixteens.’ You

know,” said Hermione, looking up at Harry, “that really is extraordinary magic!”

“For that, Hermione,” said a voice behind them, “you can have one for free.”

A beaming Fred stood before them, wearing a set of magenta robes that clashed magnificently with his flaming hair.

“How are you, Harry?” They shook hands. “And what’s happened to your eye, Hermione?”

“Your punching telescope,” she said ruefully.

“Oh blimey, I forgot about those,” said Fred. “Here —”

He pulled a tub out of his pocket and handed it to her; she unscrewed it gingerly to reveal a thick yellow paste.

“Just dab it on, that bruise’ll be gone within the hour,” said Fred. “We had to find a decent bruise remover. We’re testing most of our products on ourselves.”

Hermione looked nervous. “It is *safe*, isn’t it?” she asked.

“‘Course it is,” said Fred bracingly. “Come on, Harry, I’ll give you a tour.”

Harry left Hermione dabbing her black eye with paste and followed Fred toward the back of the shop, where he saw a stand of card and rope tricks.

“Muggle magic tricks!” said Fred happily, pointing them out. “For freaks like Dad, you know, who love Muggle stuff. It’s not a big earner, but we do fairly steady business, they’re great novelties. . . . Oh, here’s George. . . .”

Fred’s twin shook Harry’s hand energetically.

“Giving him the tour? Come through the back, Harry, that’s where

we're making the real money — *pocket anything, you, and you'll pay in more than Galleons!*" he added warningly to a small boy who hastily whipped his hand out of the tub labeled EDIBLE DARK MARKS — THEY'LL MAKE ANYONE SICK!

George pushed back a curtain beside the Muggle tricks and Harry saw a darker, less crowded room. The packaging on the products lining these shelves was more subdued.

"We've just developed this more serious line," said Fred. "Funny how it happened . . ."

"You wouldn't believe how many people, even people who work at the Ministry, can't do a decent Shield Charm," said George. "'Course, they didn't have you teaching them, Harry."

"That's right. . . . Well, we thought Shield Hats were a bit of a laugh, you know, challenge your mate to jinx you while wearing it and watch his face when the jinx just bounces off. But the Ministry bought five hundred for all its support staff! And we're still getting massive orders!"

"So we've expanded into a range of Shield Cloaks, Shield Gloves . . ."

". . . I mean, they wouldn't help much against the Unforgivable Curses, but for minor to moderate hexes or jinxes . . ."

"And then we thought we'd get into the whole area of Defense Against the Dark Arts, because it's such a money spinner," continued George enthusiastically. "This is cool. Look, Instant Darkness Powder, we're importing it from Peru. Handy if you want to make a quick escape."

"And our Decoy Detonators are just walking off the shelves,

look,” said Fred, pointing at a number of weird-looking black horn-type objects that were indeed attempting to scurry out of sight. “You just drop one surreptitiously and it’ll run off and make a nice loud noise out of sight, giving you a diversion if you need one.”

“Handy,” said Harry, impressed.

“Here,” said George, catching a couple and throwing them to Harry.

A young witch with short blonde hair poked her head around the curtain; Harry saw that she too was wearing magenta staff robes.

“There’s a customer out here looking for a joke cauldron, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley,” she said.

Harry found it very odd to hear Fred and George called “Mr. Weasley,” but they took it in their stride.

“Right you are, Verity, I’m coming,” said George promptly. “Harry, you help yourself to anything you want, all right? No charge.”

“I can’t do that!” said Harry, who had already pulled out his money bag to pay for the Decoy Detonators.

“You don’t pay here,” said Fred firmly, waving away Harry’s gold.

“But —”

“You gave us our start-up loan, we haven’t forgotten,” said George sternly. “Take whatever you like, and just remember to tell people where you got it, if they ask.”

George swept off through the curtain to help with the customers, and Fred led Harry back into the main part of the shop to find Hermione and Ginny still poring over the Patented Daydream Charms.

“Haven’t you girls found our special WonderWitch products yet?” asked Fred. “Follow me, ladies. . . .”

Near the window was an array of violently pink products around which a cluster of excited girls was giggling enthusiastically. Hermione and Ginny both hung back, looking wary.

“There you go,” said Fred proudly. “Best range of love potions you’ll find anywhere.”

Ginny raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Do they work?” she asked.

“Certainly they work, for up to twenty-four hours at a time depending on the weight of the boy in question —”

“— and the attractiveness of the girl,” said George, reappearing suddenly at their side. “But we’re not selling them to our sister,” he added, becoming suddenly stern, “not when she’s already got about five boys on the go from what we’ve —”

“Whatever you’ve heard from Ron is a big fat lie,” said Ginny calmly, leaning forward to take a small pink pot off the shelf. “What’s this?”

“Guaranteed ten-second pimple vanisher,” said Fred. “Excellent on everything from boils to blackheads, but don’t change the subject. Are you or are you not currently going out with a boy called Dean Thomas?”

“Yes, I am,” said Ginny. “And last time I looked, he was definitely one boy, not five. What are those?”

She was pointing at a number of round balls of fluff in shades of pink and purple, all rolling around the bottom of a cage and emitting high-pitched squeaks.

“Pygmy Puffs,” said George. “Miniature puffskeins, we can’t

breed them fast enough. So what about Michael Corner?"

"I dumped him, he was a bad loser," said Ginny, putting a finger through the bars of the cage and watching the Pygmy Puffs crowd around it. "They're really cute!"

"They're fairly cuddly, yes," conceded Fred. "But you're moving through boyfriends a bit fast, aren't you?"

Ginny turned to look at him, her hands on her hips. There was such a Mrs. Weasley-ish glare on her face that Harry was surprised Fred didn't recoil.

"It's none of your business. And I'll thank *you*," she added angrily to Ron, who had just appeared at George's elbow, laden with merchandise, "not to tell tales about me to these two!"

"That's three Galleons, nine Sickles, and a Knut," said Fred, examining the many boxes in Ron's arms. "Cough up."

"I'm your brother!"

"And that's our stuff you're nicking. Three Galleons, nine Sickles. I'll knock off the Knut."

"But I haven't got three Galleons, nine Sickles!"

"You'd better put it back then, and mind you put it on the right shelves."

Ron dropped several boxes, swore, and made a rude hand gesture at Fred that was unfortunately spotted by Mrs. Weasley, who had chosen that moment to appear.

"If I see you do that again I'll jinx your fingers together," she said sharply.

"Mum, can I have a Pygmy Puff?" said Ginny at once.

"A what?" said Mrs. Weasley warily.

“Look, they’re so sweet. . . .”

Mrs. Weasley moved aside to look at the Pygmy Puffs, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione momentarily had an unimpeded view out of the window. Draco Malfoy was hurrying up the street alone. As he passed Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, he glanced over his shoulder. Seconds later, he moved beyond the scope of the window and they lost sight of him.

“Wonder where his mummy is?” said Harry, frowning.

“Given her the slip by the looks of it,” said Ron.

“Why, though?” said Hermione.

Harry said nothing; he was thinking too hard. Narcissa Malfoy would not have let her precious son out of her sight willingly; Malfoy must have made a real effort to free himself from her clutches. Harry, knowing and loathing Malfoy, was sure the reason could not be innocent.

He glanced around. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were bending over the Pygmy Puffs. Mr. Weasley was delightedly examining a pack of Muggle marked playing cards. Fred and George were both helping customers. On the other side of the glass, Hagrid was standing with his back to them, looking up and down the street.

“Get under here, quick,” said Harry, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his bag.

“Oh — I don’t know, Harry,” said Hermione, looking uncertainly toward Mrs. Weasley.

“Come *on!*” said Ron.

She hesitated for a second longer, then ducked under the Cloak with Harry and Ron. Nobody noticed them vanish; they were all too

interested in Fred and George's products. Harry, Ron, and Hermione squeezed their way out of the door as quickly as they could, but by the time they gained the street, Malfoy had disappeared just as successfully as they had.

"He was going in that direction," murmured Harry as quietly as possible, so that the humming Hagrid would not hear them. "C'mon."

They scurried along, peering left and right, through shop windows and doors, until Hermione pointed ahead.

"That's him, isn't it?" she whispered. "Turning left?"

"Big surprise," whispered Ron.

For Malfoy had glanced around, then slid into Knockturn Alley and out of sight.

"Quick, or we'll lose him," said Harry, speeding up.

"Our feet'll be seen!" said Hermione anxiously, as the Cloak flapped a little around their ankles; it was much more difficult hiding all three of them under the Cloak nowadays.

"It doesn't matter," said Harry impatiently. "Just hurry!"

But Knockturn Alley, the side street devoted to the Dark Arts, looked completely deserted. They peered into windows as they passed, but none of the shops seemed to have any customers at all. Harry supposed it was a bit of a giveaway in these dangerous and suspicious times to buy Dark artifacts — or at least, to be seen buying them.

Hermione gave his arm a hard pinch.

"Ouch!"

"Shh! Look! He's in there!" she breathed in Harry's ear.

They had drawn level with the only shop in Knockturn Alley that

Harry had ever visited, Borgin and Burkes, which sold a wide variety of sinister objects. There in the midst of the cases full of skulls and old bottles stood Draco Malfoy with his back to them, just visible beyond the very same large black cabinet in which Harry had once hidden to avoid Malfoy and his father. Judging by the movements of Malfoy's hands, he was talking animatedly. The proprietor of the shop, Mr. Borgin, an oily-haired, stooping man, stood facing Malfoy. He was wearing a curious expression of mingled resentment and fear.

"If only we could hear what they're saying!" said Hermione.

"We can!" said Ron excitedly. "Hang on — damn —"

He dropped a couple more of the boxes he was still clutching as he fumbled with the largest.

"Extendable Ears, look!"

"Fantastic!" said Hermione, as Ron unraveled the long, flesh-colored strings and began to feed them toward the bottom of the door.

"Oh, I hope the door isn't Imperturbable —"

"No!" said Ron gleefully. "Listen!"

They put their heads together and listened intently to the ends of the strings, through which Malfoy's voice could be heard loud and clear, as though a radio had been turned on.

". . . you know how to fix it?"

"Possibly," said Borgin, in a tone that suggested he was unwilling to commit himself. "I'll need to see it, though. Why don't you bring it into the shop?"

"I can't," said Malfoy. "It's got to stay put. I just need you to tell me how to do it."

Harry saw Borgin lick his lips nervously.

“Well, without seeing it, I must say it will be a very difficult job, perhaps impossible. I couldn’t guarantee anything.”

“No?” said Malfoy, and Harry knew, just by his tone, that Malfoy was sneering. “Perhaps this will make you more confident.”

He moved toward Borgin and was blocked from view by the cabinet. Harry, Ron, and Hermione shuffled sideways to try and keep him in sight, but all they could see was Borgin, looking very frightened.

“Tell anyone,” said Malfoy, “and there will be retribution. You know Fenrir Greyback? He’s a family friend. He’ll be dropping in from time to time to make sure you’re giving the problem your full attention.”

“There will be no need for —”

“I’ll decide that,” said Malfoy. “Well, I’d better be off. And don’t forget to keep *that* one safe, I’ll need it.”

“Perhaps you’d like to take it now?”

“No, of course I wouldn’t, you stupid little man, how would I look carrying that down the street? Just don’t sell it.”

“Of course not . . . sir.”

Borgin made a bow as deep as the one Harry had once seen him give Lucius Malfoy.

“Not a word to anyone, Borgin, and that includes my mother, understand?”

“Naturally, naturally,” murmured Borgin, bowing again.

Next moment, the bell over the door tinkled loudly as Malfoy stalked out of the shop looking very pleased with himself. He passed

so close to Harry, Ron, and Hermione that they felt the Cloak flutter around their knees again. Inside the shop, Borgin remained frozen; his unctuous smile had vanished; he looked worried.

“What was that about?” whispered Ron, reeling in the Extendable Ears.

“Dunno,” said Harry, thinking hard. “He wants something mended . . . and he wants to reserve something in there. . . . Could you see what he pointed at when he said ‘that one’?”

“No, he was behind that cabinet —”

“You two stay here,” whispered Hermione.

“What are you — ?”

But Hermione had already ducked out from under the Cloak. She checked her hair in the reflection in the glass, then marched into the shop, setting the bell tinkling again. Ron hastily fed the Extendable Ears back under the door and passed one of the strings to Harry.

“Hello, horrible morning, isn’t it?” Hermione said brightly to Borgin, who did not answer, but cast her a suspicious look. Humming cheerily, Hermione strolled through the jumble of objects on display.

“Is this necklace for sale?” she asked, pausing beside a glass-fronted case.

“If you’ve got one and a half thousand Galleons,” said Mr. Borgin coldly.

“Oh — er — no, I haven’t got quite that much,” said Hermione, walking on. “And . . . what about this lovely — um — skull?”

“Sixteen Galleons.”

“So it’s for sale, then? It isn’t being . . . kept for anyone?”

Mr. Borgin squinted at her. Harry had the nasty feeling he knew

exactly what Hermione was up to. Apparently Hermione felt she had been rumbled too because she suddenly threw caution to the winds.

“The thing is, that — er — boy who was in here just now, Draco Malfoy, well, he’s a friend of mine, and I want to get him a birthday present, but if he’s already reserved anything, I obviously don’t want to get him the same thing, so . . . um . . .”

It was a pretty lame story in Harry’s opinion, and apparently Borgin thought so too.

“Out,” he said sharply. “Get out!”

Hermione did not wait to be asked twice, but hurried to the door with Borgin at her heels. As the bell tinkled again, Borgin slammed the door behind her and put up the CLOSED sign.

“Ah well,” said Ron, throwing the Cloak back over Hermione. “Worth a try, but you were a bit obvious —”

“Well, next time you can show me how it’s done, Master of Mystery!” she snapped.

Ron and Hermione bickered all the way back to Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, where they were forced to stop so that they could dodge undetected around a very anxious-looking Mrs. Weasley and Hagrid, who had clearly noticed their absence. Once in the shop, Harry whipped off the Invisibility Cloak, hid it in his bag, and joined in with the other two when they insisted, in answer to Mrs. Weasley’s accusations, that they had been in the back room all along, and that she could not have looked properly.

Draco Loop 'n Draai

Harry bly die volgende paar weke binne die grense van Die Konynenes se tuin. Hy speel omtrent heeldag twee-aan-'n-kant Kwiddiek in die Weasleys se boord (hy en Hermione teen Ron en Ginny; Hermione speel pateties en Ginny is goed, so die twee spanne weeg taamlik goed teen mekaar op) en saans eet hy drie keer van alles wat mevrou Weasley voor hom neersit.

Dit sou 'n heerlike, salige vakansie gewees het as dit nie was vir die stories oor verdwynings, vreemde ongelukke en selfs sterfgevälle wat nou amper daagliks in die *Daaglikse Profeet* verskyn nie. Soms bring Bill en meneer Weasley nuus huis toe selfs nog voor dit die koerant haal. Tot mevrou Weasley se ontsteltenis plaas Remus Lupin 'n demper op Harry se sestiende verjaardagpartytjie met grusame tyding. Lupin lyk stroef en uitgeteer; sy bruin hare het oral grys strepe in en sy kleres is meer verslete en gelap as ooit.

“Daar was nog 'n paar Dementor-aanvalle,” kondig hy aan terwyl mevrou Weasley vir hom 'n groot homp verjaardagkoek gee. “En Igor Karkaroff se liggaam is in 'n pondok in die noorde ontdek. Die Donker Merk het oor die plek gehang – ek moet sê, ek is verbaas dat hy 'n jaar lank kon oorleef ná hy by die Doodseters gedros het; sover ek kan onthou, het Sirius se broer Regulus net 'n paar dae uitgehou.”

“Ja, maar,” sê mevrou Weasley fronsend, “kom ons praat nou oor iets ande—”

“Remus, het jy van Florean Fortesque gehoor?” vra Bill, vir wie Fleur aanhoudend nog wyn skink. “Die baas van —”

“— daai roomysplek in Diagonaalstraat?” val Harry hom in die rede en kry 'n aaklige hol kol op die krop van sy maag. “Hy het altyd vir my verniet roomys gegee. Wat het met hom gebeur?”

“Hy's daar weggesleep, te oordeel na hoe sy plek gelyk het.”

“Hoekom?” vra Ron terwyl mevrou Weasley Bill vies aanguur.

“Wie weet? Hy moes hulle seker kwaad gemaak het. Ou Florean was 'n goeie man.”

“Gepraat van Diagonaalstraat,” sê meneer Weasley. “Dit lyk of Ollivander ook daar weg is.”

“Die towerstafmaker?” vra Ginny en lyk geskok.

“Einste hy. Sy winkel staan leeg. G’n teken van ’n bakleiery nie. Niemand weet of hy vrywillig vort is en of hy ontvoer is nie.”

“Maar waar gaan mense nou towerstawwe kry?”

“Hulle sal maar na ander fabriseerders toe moet gaan,” sê Lupin. “Maar Ollivander was die beste, en as die ander kant hom beetgekry het, is dit slegte nuus vir ons.”

Die dag ná hierdie taamlik mistroostige verjaardagtee daag hul briewe en boeklyste van Hogwarts op. Daar is ’n verrassing vir Harry: hy is as die Kwiddiek-kaptein aangewys.

“Dit beteken jy’s op dieselfde vlak as die prefekte!” roep Hermione bly uit. “Jy kan nou ons spesiale badkamer en alles gebruik!”

“Wow, ek onthou nog toe Charlie een van dié gedra het,” sê Ron terwyl hy opgewonde na die wapen kyk. “Harry, dis so cool! Jy’s my kaptein – dis nou ás jy my weer terugvat in die span, ha-ha ...”

“Wel, ek veronderstel ons kan ’n uitstappie na Diagonaalstraat nie meer veel langer uitstel noudat julle dit gekry het nie,” sug mevrou Weasley en kyk na Ron se boeklys. “Ons kan Saterdag gaan, solank jou pa nie dan hoef te gaan werk nie. Ek gaan nie sonder hom soontoe nie.”

“Dink Ma nou rêrig Jy-Weet-Wie gaan agter ’n boekrak in Sierskrif en Klatt wegkruip?” grinnik Ron.

“Fortesque en Ollivander is net weg op vakansie, nè?” sê-vra mevrou Weasley dadelik vurig. “As jy dink sekuriteit is ’n grap bly jy by die huis en ek kry jou goed vir jou –”

“Nee, ek wil saamgaan. Ek wil Fred en George se winkel sien!” keer Ron vinnig.

“Dan beter jy jou gedra, jongman, voor ek besluit jy’s te onverantwoordelik om saam met ons te kom!” sê mevrou Weasley kwaai terwyl sy haar wekker met al nege wysers nog steeds op *doodsgevaar* opraap en dit bo-op ’n stapel pas gewaste handdoeke balanseer. “En dieselfde geld vir die terugganery Hogwarts toe!”

Ron staar Harry dronkgeslaan aan terwyl sy ma die wasgoed-mandjie en wankelende wekker in haar arms opraap en by die vertrek uitstorm.

“Jissie ... Mens kan nie eens meer ’n grap hier rond maak nie ...”

Maar Ron maak die volgende paar dae geen ligsinnige aanmerkings oor Voldemort nie. Saterdag breek aan sonder enige verdere uitbarstings deur mevrou Weasley, alhoewel sy met ontbyt baie **gespanne** lyk. Bill, wat saam met Fleur by die huis gaan bly (tot

Hermione en Ginny se groot verligting), gee vir Harry 'n vol geldsak oor die tafel aan.

“Waar’s myne?” vra Ron dadelik met groot oë.

“Dis alles Harry s’n, jou idioot,” sê Bill. “Ek het dit vir jou uit jou kluis gaan haal, Harry, want dit neem die publiek deesdae omtrent vyf uur om by hul goud uit te kom oor die gnome hul sekuriteit so verskerp het. Twee dae gelede het hulle ’n Eerlikheidstafie opgedruk in Arkie Philpott se ... Wel, glo my, hierdie manier is makliker.”

“Dankie, Bill,” sê Harry en sit sy goud in sy sak.

“y is altyd so bedagsaam,” spin Fleur liefdevol en vryf Bill se neus. Ginny maak agter Fleur se rug of sy in haar pap opgooi. Harry verstik in sy graanvlokkies en Ron klop hom op die rug.

Dit is ’n bewolkte, mistige dag. Een van die Ministerie van Towerkuns se spesiale motors waarin Harry al een keer vantevore gery het, wag vir hulle op die werf toe hulle by die huis uitkom en hul mantels vasknoop.

“Dis goed Pa kan hulle nou weer vir ons kry,” sê Ron dankbaar en strek hom behaaglik uit terwyl die motor geruisloos by Die Konynenes wegry, met Bill en Fleur wat deur die kombuisvenster vir hulle waai. Hy, Harry, Hermione en Ginny pas gemaklik op die breë agterste sitplek in.

“Moenie té gewoond raak hieraan nie; dis alles net oor Harry,” sê meneer Weasley oor sy skouer. Hy en mevrou Weasley sit voor by die Ministerie se bestuurder; die voorste passasiersitplek was so tegemoetkomend om te rek tot wat na ’n tweesitplek-rusbank lyk. “Hy geniet tans topsekuriteitstatus. En by die Stomende Pot sal daar addisionele sekuriteit by ons aanluit.”

Harry sê niks; hy is nie baie lus om inkopies te doen met ’n bataljon Aurors om hom nie. Hy het sy onsigbaarheidsmantel in sy rugsak gesit en voel dit behoort genoeg te wees vir die Ministerie as dit genoeg is vir Dumbledore, maar noudat hy daaraan dink, is hy nie seker of die Ministerie van sy mantel weet nie.

“Hier is ons nou.” Die bestuurder sê ’n verbasende kort rukkie later vir die eerste keer iets terwyl hy stadig in Charing Cross-straat af ry en buite die Stomende Pot stilhou. “Ek moet vir julle wag. Enige idee hoe lank julle gaan neem?”

“’n Paar uur, dink ek,” sê meneer Weasley. “A, goed so, hy’s hier!”

Harry maak soos meneer Weasley en kyk by die venster uit; sy hart bokspring. Dis nie Aurors wat buite die herberg wag nie; dis die reus met die swart baard: Rubeus Hagrid, Hogwarts se boswagter.

Hy dra 'n lang bewervelmantel en straal van geluk toe hy Harry se gesig sien, totaal onbewus van die Moggels wat verbystap en hom verskrik aanstaar.

“Harry!” bulder hy toe hulle uit die motor klim en hy druk Harry so styf vas dat dit voel of al die bene in sy lyf breek. “Bokbok – ek bedoel Flinkvlerk – o, jy moet hom sien, Harry; hy’s so bly om weer terug in die buitelug te wees –”

“Ek’s bly hy’s bly,” sê Harry laggend terwyl hy sy ribbes masseer. “Ons het nie geweet jy gaan ons ‘sekuriteit’ wees nie!”

“Nes in die ou dae, nè? Sien, die Ministerie wou ’n spul Aurors stuur, maar toe sê Dumbledore ek sal doen,” sê Hagrid trots. Hy stoot sy borskas uit en druk sy duime in sy sakke. “Maar laat ons weg wees – Loop julle voor, Molly, Arthur –”

Die Stomende Pot is vir die eerste keer vandat Harry kan onthou, heeltemal leeg. Al een van die gewone ou klomp wat oorgebly het, is Tom, die herbergier, verrimpeld en tandloos. Hy kyk hoopvol op toe hulle inkom, maar voor hy nog kan praat, kondig Hagrid ewe vernaam aan: “Stap vandag net deur, Tom. Seker jy verstaan – Hogwarts-besigheid, weet jy.”

Tom knik bedruk en begin weer glase blink vryf; Harry, Hermione, Hagrid en die Weasleys loop deur die kroeg en uit tot in die koue klein agterste binnehof waar die vullisdromme staan. Hagrid lig sy pienk sambreel en tik teen ’n sekere baksteen in die muur wat dadelik oopgaan en ’n gewelfde poort vorm na ’n kronkelende keisteestraat. Hulle stap deur die ingang en gaan staan dan om rond te kyk.

Diagonaalstraat het verander. Die kleurvolle, glinsterende vensteruitstallings van towerspreukboeke, hekseketels en bestanddele vir towerdrankies is almal toegeplak met groot plakkate van die Ministerie van Towerkuns. Die meeste van hierdie somber pers plakkate is vergrote weergawes van die sekuriteitsmaatreëls op die pamflette wat die Ministerie gedurende die somer uitgestuur het, maar op ander is daar bewegende swart-wit foto’s van Doodseters wat op vrye voete verkeer. Bellatrix Lestrange kyk smalend vir almal vanuit die naaste apteek se voorste venster. ’n Paar vensters is met planke toegespyker, onder andere Florean Fortesque se Roomyspaleis s’n, en daar is nou armoedige stalletjies oral langs die straat. Aan die naaste een, wat buitekant Sierskrif en Klatt onder ’n gevlekte seilafdakkie met strepe opgerig is, is daar ’n plakkaat vasgeplak wat sê:

'n Toiingrige towenaar skud arms vol kettings waaraan silwer simbole vir verbygangers rinkel.

“Een vir jou dogtertjie, mevrou?” vra hy vir mevrou Weasley toe hulle verbyloop en gluur na Ginny. “Om haar mooi ou nekkie te beskerm?”

“As ek op diens was ...” sê meneer Weasley en gluur kwaai vir die amuletverkoper.

“Moet asseblief nie nou mense begin arresteer nie, skat; ons is haastig,” sê mevrou Weasley en kyk senuweeagtig na haar lys. “Ek dink ons moet eerste na Madame Malkin toe gaan – Hermione soek nuwe rokmantels en Ron se enkels steek al te ver onder sy skoolmantels uit en jy moet ook nuwes kry, Harry; jy’t só uitgeskiet – komaan, almal –”

“Molly, dis onsinnig dat almal van ons na Madame Malkin toe gaan,” sê meneer Weasley. “Hoekom gaan daardie drie nie saam met Hagrid nie, dan gaan kry ons almal se skoolboeke by Sierskrif en Klatt?”

“Ek weet nie,” sê mevrou Weasley gespanne, duidelik in twee geskeur tussen ’n begeerte om die inkopies vinnig verby te kry en die wens om al haar kuikens bymekaar te hou. “Hagrid, dink jy – ?”

“Moenie worrie nie; hulle sal oukei wees by my, Molly,” sê Hagrid gerusstellend en waai ’n hand so groot soos ’n vullisdromdeksel in die lug. Mevrou Weasley lyk nie heeltemal oortuig nie, maar gee kop en verdwyn saam met haar man en Ginny na Sierskrif en Klatt terwyl Harry, Ron, Hermione en Hagrid na Madame Malkin se winkel toe loop.

Harry kom agter baie van die mense wat verbystap, lyk net so bekommerd en benoud soos mevrou Weasley en dat niemand meer stop om te gesels nie; die mense bly almal net in hul eie groepies en bepaal hulle streng by hul inkopies. Dit lyk of niemand op sy eie hier is nie.

“Sal dalk bietjie beknop raak met almal van ons daar binne,” sê Hagrid. Hy het by Madame Malkin se winkel gaan staan en buig nou af om by die venster in te kyk. “Ek sal hier buite wag staan, orraait?”

Harry, Ron en Hermione gaan saam by die winkeltjie in. Dit lyk met die eerste oogopslag leeg, maar die oomblik dat die deur agter hulle toegaan, hoor hulle ’n bekende stem agter ’n rak glinsterende groen en blou mantels praat.

“... alsehalwe ’n kind, as Moeder dit nog nie agtergekom het nie. Ek is groot genoeg om my inkopies *alleen* te kom doen.”

Daar is ’n kloekgeluid en Harry hoor ’n stem wat hy dadelik as

Madame Malkin s'n herken. "Kom nou, seun; jou moeder is heeltemal reg: Nie een van ons behoort meer op ons eie iewers heen te gaan nie; dit het niks daarmee te doen of jy nog 'n kind is –"

"Kyk waar jy daai speld insteek!"

'n Tienerseun met 'n bleek, skerp gesig en witblonde hare verskyn van agter die klererak. Hy dra 'n mooi donkergroen kleed met blink spelde in die soom onder en aan die moue. Hy beweeg na die spieël en bekyk homself; dit neem 'n paar oomblikke voor hy Harry, Ron en Hermione se weerkaatsing oor sy skouer sien. Sy liggrys oë vernou.

"As Moeder wonder wat so ruik: 'n Modderbloed het nou net hier ingeloop," sê Draco Malfoy.

"Dis nie nodig om sulke taal te gebruik nie!" sê Madame Malkin terwyl sy met 'n maatband en 'n towerstaf agter die klererakke uitkom. "En ek wil ook nie hê daar moet towerstawwe in my winkel uitgepluk word nie!" voeg sy haastig by toe sy opmerk Harry en Ron staan albei met hul towerstawwe gereed en op Malfoy gerig.

Hermione, wat effens agter hulle staan, fluister: "Los hom. Dis nie die moeite werd nie ..."

"Ja, asof julle dit sal waag om buite die skool towerkrag te gebruik," sê Draco smalend. "Wie't jou oog so pimpel en pers geslaan, Granger? Ek wil vir hom blomme stuur."

"Dis nou genoeg!" sê Madame Malkin skerp en soek oor haar skouer na ondersteuning. "Mevrou – asseblief –"

Narcissa Malfoy verskyn van agter die klererak.

"Sit dit weg," sê sy kil vir Harry en Ron. "As julle my seun weer aanval, sal ek seker maak dit is die laaste ding wat julle ooit doen."

"Regtig?" sê Harry. Hy gee 'n tree vorentoe en kyk na die gladde, arrogante gesig wat ondanks haar bleekheid nog steeds baie soos haar suster s'n lyk. Hy is nou net so lank soos sy. "Gaan julle 'n paar van julle Doodseter-pêlle kry om van ons ontslae te raak?"

Madame Malkin kreun en gryp na haar hart.

"Genugtig, hoe kan jy beweer – dis 'n gevaarlike ding om te sê – Sit asseblief julle towerstawwe weg!"

Maar Harry laat sak nie sy towerstaf nie. Narcissa Malfoy glimlag honend.

"Ek sien die feit dat jy Dumbledore se witbroodjie is, gee jou 'n valse gevoel van veiligheid, Harry Potter. Maar Dumbledore sal nie altyd daar wees om jou te beskerm nie."

Harry kyk spottend oral in die winkel rond.

"Wow ... kyk nou net ... Hy's nie nou hier nie! So hoekom baklei ons dit nie nou uit nie? Hulle gee dalk vir jou 'n dubbelsel in Azkaban saam met jou nikswerd man!"

Malfoy beweeg woedend na Harry, maar struikel oor die kleed wat te lank vir hom is. Ron lag hard.

“Waag dit net weer om so met my ma te praat, Potter!” sis Draco.

“Toemaar, Draco,” sê Narcissa en druk haar dun wit vingers op sy skouer om hom in toom te hou. “Ek dink Potter sal met liewe Sirius verenig wees lank voor ek en Lucius weer verenig is.”

Harry lig sy towerstaf hoër.

“Nee, Harry!” roep Hermione. Sy gryp sy arm en probeer dit af vloer toe dwing. “Dink ... Moenie ... Jy sal in sulke groot moeilikheid kom ...”

Madame Malkin staan vir ’n oomblik verbouereerd vasgenael en besluit dan skynbaar om te maak asof niks gebeur het nie, in die hoop dat dit nie sal nie. Sy buig oor Malfoy wat nog steeds vir Harry gluur.

“Ek dink hierdie linkermou moet nog ’n bietjie korter kom; laat ek net –”

“Au!” brul Malfoy en klap haar hand weg. “Kyk waar jy jou spelde insteek, vroumens! Moeder – ek dink nie ek wil hierdie ding meer hê nie –”

Hy pluk die kleed oor sy kop en gooi dit op die vloer voor madame Malkin se voete neer.

“Jy’s reg, Draco,” sê Narcissa en kyk Hermione met veragting aan, “noudat ek weet watter skuim hier kom klere koop ... Ons kan beter doen by Twilfitt en Tattings.

En daarmee stoom hulle twee by die winkel uit. Malfoy maak seker dat hy op pad uit so hard moontlik in Ron vasloop.

“Goeie *genugtig!*” sê madame Malkin, tel die neergegooide kleed van die vloer af op en stryk die punt van haar towerstaf liggies soos ’n stofsuier daaroor om dit skoon te maak.

Haar aandag is glad nie by Ron en Harry wat nuwe mantels aanpas nie en sy probeer selfs towenaar-pleks van heksmantels aan Hermione verkoop. Toe sy hulle uiteindelik beleefd by die winkel uitlaat, lyk sy dankbaar om van hulle ontslae te wees.

“Alles gekry?” vra Hagrid vrolik toe hulle weer langs hom staan.

“Omtrent als,” sê Harry. “Het jy die Malfoys gesien?”

“Ja,” sê Hagrid ongeërg. “Maar moenie oor hulle worrie nie, Harry. Hulle sal dit nie waag om hier in die middel van Diagonaalstraat moeilikheid te maak nie.”

Harry, Ron en Hermione gee mekaar ’n kyk, maar voor hulle Hagrid kan ontnugter, verskyn meneer en mevrou Weasley en Ginny, al drie met swaar pakke boeke.

“Almal okei?” vra mevrou Weasley. “Julle mantels gekry? Reg,

kom ons gaan gou by die apteek en Grootoog in op pad na Fred en George toe – bly bymekaar, hoor ...”

Harry en Ron koop nie bestanddele by die apteek nie, want hulle doen nie meer Towerdrankies nie, maar hulle koop vir Hedwig en Pigwidgeon groot bokse uilneute by die Grootoog Uilemporium. En toe, met mevrou Weasley wat elke minuut of wat op haar horlosie kyk, mik hulle verder straataf op soek na Weasleys se Wonderpoetse, Fred en George se grapwinkel.

“Ons het regtig nie baie tyd oor nie,” sê mevrou Weasley. “Ons kan net vinnig rondkyk en dan moet ons terug motor toe. Dit moet nou hier naby wees. Daar’s nommer twee-en-neëntig ... vier-en-neëntig ...”

“Wow!” roep Ron uit en steek in sy spore vas.

Tussen al die vervelige, plakkaatbeplakte winkelveusters om hulle, vang Fred en George se vensters jou oog soos ’n vuurwerkvertoning. Verbygangers kyk oor hul skouers terug na die vensters en ’n paar mense gaan staan selfs en staar stom van verbasing daarna. Die linkerkantse venster is propvol verskillende blink voorwerpe wat uit bokse spring, draai, flikker, hop en gil; Harry se oë begin water net van kyk daarna. Die hele regterkantse venster is toegeplak met ’n reuseplakkaat, dieselfde pers as die Ministerie s’n, maar met die volgende woorde in flikkerende geel sierletters daarop geskryf:

*Die kat kom weer, en so ook die Donker Heer
en van ang is almal gekonstipeer.
So koop vir jou ons Magiese Dop:
POEFA-WEER
die Konstipasiesensasie: die Nasie se Purgasie!*

Harry begin lag. Hy hoor ’n sagte kreun langs hom en sien hoe mevrou Weasley verbysterd na die plakkaat staar. Haar lippe beweeg en vorm sag die naam “Poefa-Weer.”

“Hulle gaan in hul beddens vermoor word!” snak sy.

“Nonsens!” sê Ron, wat saam met Harry lag. “Hulle’s briljant!”

Hy en Harry stap eerste by die winkel in. Dit is gepak met klante; Harry kan nie naby die rakke kom nie. Hy staan en rondkyk na die bokse wat tot teen die plafon opgestapel is; hier is die Stokkiesdraai Snoepies wat die tweeling tydens hul laaste, onvoltooide jaar in Hogwarts vervolmaak het. Harry sien die Neusbloei Nougat is baie gewild, want daar is net een gehawende boks op die rak oor. Daar is dromme vol poets-towerstawwe: Die goedkoopstes verander net in rubberhoenders of langbroeke as jy hulle swaai; die duurstes

slaan die onbedagte stafswaaier oor die kop en teen die nek. Daar is ook bokse met verskillende soorte veerpenne in, van Self-Ink en Spel-Nagaan tot Slim-Antwoord. Harry sien 'n opening tussen die mense en wurm sy pad deur tot by die toonbank waar 'n groepie giggelende tienjariges kyk hoe 'n klein houtmannetjie stadig met trappies opklim na 'n regte outydse galg toe. Op die speletjie se boks staan daar: Laksman – Toor reg of hy's weg!

“Gepatenteerde Dagdroom-Amulette ...”

Hermione kry dit reg om tussen die gedrang deur by 'n groot uitstalling naby die toonbank uit te kom en sy begin die inligting agterop 'n boks met 'n helderkleurige prent van 'n aantreklike jong man en 'n meisie wat in vervoering oor hom is, lees. Hulle staan saam op 'n seerowerskip se dek.

“*Een eenvoudige inkantasie en jy betree 'n topkwaliteit, hoogs realistiese dertigminuut-dagdroom, maklik om tydens 'n gewone skoolperiode in te pas en feitlik onbespeurbaar (nuwe-effekte sluit afwesige uitdrukking en minimale kwyl in). Nie te koop aan onder-sestiens nie.*” Weet jy,” sê Hermione en kyk op na Harry, “dit vat sowaar buitengewone toorkrag!”

“Daarvoor, Hermoine,” sê 'n stem agter hulle, “kan jy een verniet kry.”

Hulle swaai om en daar staan 'n stralende Fred in 'n purperrooi mantel wat heerlik met sy vlamrooi hare bots.

“Hoe gaan dit, Harry?” Hulle skud hand. “En wat het met jou oog gebeur, Hermione?”

“Dis julle vuisslaan-teleskoop se skuld,” antwoord sy afgehaal.

“O maggies, ek het skoon daarvan vergeet,” sê Fred. “Hier –”

Hy haal 'n flessie uit sy sak en gee dit vir haar; sy skroef die prop versigtig los en kyk na die dik geel salf daarin.

“Smeer daarvan aan en die kneusplek is binne 'n uur weg,” sê Fred. “Ons moes 'n ordentlike kneusverwyderaar kry, want ons toets die meeste van ons produkte op onself.”

Hermione lyk senuweeagtig. “Is jy seker dis veilig?”

“Tuurlik, ja,” sê Fred opgewek. “Komaan, Harry; ek vat jou gou op 'n toer.”

Harry los vir Hermione, wat salf aan haar blouoog smeer, en volg Fred tot agter in die winkel waar hy 'n vertoonkas met kaart- en toutruuks sien.

“Moggel-toortruuks!” sê Fred laggend en wys daarna. “Vir *freaks* soos Pa wat mal is oor Moggel-goed. Ons maak nie 'n groot wins hierop nie, maar dit verkoop heel goed, want dis 'n nuutjie vir toewenaars ... O, hier's George ...”

Fred se tweelingbroer skud Harry se hand energiek.

“Wat jy hom bietjie rond? Kom deur agtertoe, Harry; dis waar ons die groot geld maak – *Gaps net iets, en jy sal met meer as Galjoene betaal!*” waarsku hy ’n seuntjie wat sy hand haastig wegruk uit ’n houer met die etiket: Eetbare Donker Merke – Maak Enigene Siek!

George trek die gordyn langs die Moggel-truiks oop en Harry sien ’n donker vertrek wat nie so stampvol is nie. Die verpakking op die produkte wat hier op die rakke staan, is meer stemmig.

“Ons het so pas ’n ernstiger reeks ontwikkel,” sê Fred. “Snaaks hoe dit gebeur het ...”

“Jy sal nie glo hoeveel mense, selfs mense wat by die Ministerie werk, nie ’n ordentlike Skildspreuk ken nie,” sê George. “Maar hulle het jou natuurlik nie as hul onderwyser gehad nie, Harry.”

“Dis reg ... So ons het gedink Skildhoedens kan nogal snaaks wees. Jy weet, daag ’n pël uit om ’n vloek oor jou uit te spreek terwyl jy dit dra en hou sy gesig dop wanneer die vloek op hom terugspring. Die Ministerie het vyfhonderd van die goed vir hul steunpersoneel gekoop! En ons kry die een massiewe bestelling op die ander!”

“Ons het die reeks toe uitgebrei en daar is nou ook Skildmantels, Skildhandskoene ...”

“... Kyk, ons weet hulle sal nie hond haaraf maak teen Onvergeeflike Vloeke nie, maar vir kleiner tot gemiddelde doepas en paljasse ...”

“En toe het ons gedink ons moet munt slaan uit Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste, want dis deesdae op almal se brein,” gaan George entoesiasies aan. “Dis nogal cool. Kyk, dis Kitsdonker Poeier wat ons uit Peru invoer. Handig as jy vinnig wil ontsnap.”

“En ons Dwaalspoor Snellers loop letterlik van die rakke af. Kyk,” sê Fred en wys na ’n paar vreemde, toeteragtige swart voorwerpe wat inderdaad probeer voete kry. “Jy laat val een net stilletjies en hy hol weg en gaan los ’n harde knal iewers anders, wat die aandag van jou aflei wanneer jy dit nodig het.”

“Handig,” sê Harry beïndruk.

“Hier,” sê George en gooi vir Harry ’n paar wat hy gevang het. ’n Jong heks met kort blonde hare steek haar kop by die gordyne in; Harry sien sy dra ook ’n purperrooi personeelmantel.

“Daar’s ’n kliënt hier wat ’n graphekseketel soek, meneer Weasley en meneer Weasley,” sê sy.

Dis vir Harry snaaks om te hoor iemand noem Fred en George “meneer Weasley”, maar hulle lyk heel gemaklik daarmee.

“Reg, Verity; ek kom,” sê George dadelik. “Harry, vat vir jou wat jy ook al wil hê, oukei? Verniet.”

“Ek kan dit nie doen nie!” sê Harry. Hy het al klaar sy geldsak uitgehaal om vir die Dwaalspoor Snellers te betaal.

“Hier betaal jy vir niks nie,” sê Fred streng en weier om Harry se goud te vat.

“Maar –”

“Jy’t vir ons geld geleen om ons besigheid meer te begin en ons het dit nie vergeet nie,” sê George ernstig. “Vat enigiets waarvan jy hou en onthou net om vir mense te sê waar jy dit gekry het, as hulle jou vra.”

George trek die gordyn oop om die klante te gaan bedien en Fred lei Harry terug na die hoofdeel van die winkel waar hulle afkom op Hermione en Ginny wat hulle nog steeds aan die Gepatenteerde Dagdroom-Amulette staan en vergaap.

“Het julle meisies nog nie ons HiperHeks-produkte ontdek nie?” vra Fred. “Volg my, dames ...”

Naby die venster is daar ’n reeks skrilpienk produkte waarom ’n klompie giggelende meisies opgewonde saamkoek. Hermione en Ginny deins al twee wantrouig terug.

“Daar’s hulle,” sê Fred trots. “Die wêreld se beste reeks liefdesdrankies.”

Ginny lig ’n wenkbrou skepties. “Werk die goed?”

“Verseker werk dit – vir tot vier-en-twintig uur op ’n slag, afhange van die betrokke ou se gewig –”

“– en die meisie se skoonheid,” sê George, wat skielik weer langs hulle verskyn. “Maar ons verkoop dit nie aan ons suster nie,” voeg hy by en lyk meteens streng, “nie noudat sy al klaar vyf ouens op sleeptou het volgens wat ons –”

“Wát julle ook al by Ron gehoor het, is ’n groot vet leuen,” sê Ginny kalm terwyl sy vorentoe leun om ’n pienk botteltjie van die rak af te haal. “Wat’s dit?”

“GewaARBorgde Tien-Sekonde Puisiewegvatter,” sê Fred. “Uitstekend vir enigiets van bloedvinte tot swartkoppies, maar moenie die onderwerp verander nie. Gaan jy nie op die oomblik met ’n ou met die naam Dean Thomas uit nie?”

“Ja,” sê Ginny, “en toe ek laas gekyk het, was hy definitief een ou, nie vyf nie. Wat is dit?”

Sy wys na ’n klomp ronde donsballen in skakerings van pienk en pers wat onder in ’n hok rondrol en skril gil.

“Pigmee Poffies,” sê George. “Miniatuur-poffbolle. Ons kry hulle nie vinnig genoeg geteel nie. So wat van Michael Corner?”

“Ek het hom gelos, want hy’s ’n slegte verloorder,” sê Ginny. Sy steek haar vinger deur die hok se tralies en kyk hoe die Pigmee Poffies dadelik nader kom. “Hulle’s regtig oulik!”

“Ja, hulle’s nogal taamluk troetelbaar,” gee Fred toe. “Maar dink jy nie jy vlieg bietjie te vinnig deur die kêrels nie?”

Ginny draai om en kyk hom met haar hande op haar heupe aan. Daar is só ’n mevrou Weasleyrige gluur op haar gesig dat Harry verbaas is Fred retireer nie.

“Dit het niks met jou uit te waai nie. En jy,” sê sy vies vir Ron wat met hande vol goed langs George opduik, “moet ophou om vir hierdie twee stories oor my aan te dra!”

“Dis drie Galjoene, nege Sekels en ’n Knoet,” sê Fred ná hy al die bokse in Ron se arms ’n kyk gegee het. “Toe, dok op.”

“Ek’s julle broer!”

“En dis ons goed wat jy hier wil uitdra. Drie Galjoene, nege Sekels. Ek gee jou die een Knoet afslag.”

“Maar ek het nie drie Galjoene, nege Sikkels nie!”

“Dan beter jy dit gaan terugsit, en alles op die regte rakke.”

Ron laat val ’n paar bokse, vloek en gooi vir Fred ’n onbeskofte handgebaar. Ongelukkig vir hom verskyn mevrou Weasley net mooi toe op die toneel.

“As ek jou dit weer sien doen, toor ek jou vingers aan mekaar vas,” sê sy kwaai.

“Ma, kan ek ’n Pigmee Poffie kry?” vra Ginny skielik.

“’n Wat?” vra mevrou Weasley versigtig.

“Kyk, hulle’s so oulik ...”

Mevrou Weasley beweeg eenkant toe om na die Pigmee Poffies te gaan kyk, en Harry, Ron en Hermione kan vir ’n oomblik by die venster uitsien buitentoe. Draco Malfoy loop haastig alleen by die straat op. Toe hy by Weasleys se Wonderpoetse verbyloop, kyk hy oor sy skouer. Sekondes later verdwyn hy uit sig.

“Wonder waar’s sy mamma?” sê Harry en frons.

“Lyk of hy haar afgeskud het,” sê Ron.

“Maar hoekom?” wil Hermione weet.

Harry sê niks nie; hy dink te hard. Narcissa Malfoy sal haar liewe seuntjie nie willens en wetens onder haar oë uitlaat nie; Malfoy sou moeite moet gedoen het om uit haar kloue weg te kom. Harry ken Malfoy te goed en verafsku hom genoeg om te weet dit kan nie om ’n onskuldige rede wees nie.

Hy kyk om. Mevrou Weasley en Ginny staan oor die Pigmee Poffies gebuk. Meneer Weasley bekyk ’n pak Moggel-speelkaarte **ingenome**. Fred en George bedien albei klante. Aan die ander kant

van die venster staan Hagrid met sy rug na hulle en kyk op en af in die straat.

“Klim hieronder in, gou!” sê Harry en haal haastig sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel uit sy sak.

“O – ek weet nie, Harry,” sê Hermione en kyk onseker in mevrou Weasley se rigting.

“Komaan!” roep Ron.

Sy huiwer ’n sekonde langer en duik dan saam met Harry en Ron onder die mantel in. Niemand sien hulle verdwyn nie; almal stel te veel in Fred en George se produkte belang. Harry, Ron en Hermione beur so vinnig moontlik by die deur uit, maar teen die tyd dat hulle in die straat kom, het Malfoy net so suksesvol soos hulle verdwyn.

“Hy’t in daai rigting geloop,” fluister Harry sag sodat Hagrid wat daar staan en neurie hom nie moet hoor nie. “Komaan.”

Hulle beweeg haastig weg, kyk links en regs en by winkelve-
sters en -deure in tot Hermione na iemand voor hulle beduie.

“Dis hy, is dit nie?” fluister sy. “Daar draai hy links.”

“Groot verrassing,” grinnik Ron sag.

Malfoy kyk vlugtig om, en glip dan uit sig by Nagliedsteeg in.

“Gou, of ons gaan hom uit die oog verloor,” sê Harry en stap vinniger.

“Iemand gaan ons voete sien!” waarsku Hermione bang terwyl die mantel om hul enkels opflap; dit is deesdae baie moeiliker vir hulle al drie om daaronder weg te kruip.

“Dit maak nie saak nie,” sê Harry ongeduldig. “Maak net gou!”

Maar Nagliedsteeg, die systraatjie wat in die Donker Kunste spesialiseer, lyk heeltemal verlate. Hulle loer by vensters in soos hulle verbyloop, maar dit lyk nie of enige van die winkels enige klante het nie. Harry sê vir homself dis seker omdat dit dom is om in hierdie gevaarlike tye waarin almal mekaar verdink, Donker artefakte te koop – of ten minste om gesien te word terwyl jy dit doen.

Hermione knyp sy arm hard.

“Au!”

“Sjuut! Kyk! Hy’s daar binne!” sê sy sag in Harry se oor.

Hulle is nou voor die enigste winkel in Nagliedsteeg waarin Harry nog ooit was: Borgin & Burkes, ’n plek wat ’n groot verskeidenheid sinistere voorwerpe verkoop. Daar, tussen kiste vol skedels en ou bottels, staan Draco Malfoy met sy rug na hulle, net-net sigbaar agter dieselfde groot swart kabinet waarin Harry eenkeer moes wegkruip om Malfoy en sy pa te ontduik. Te oordeel na Malfoy se handbewegings praat hy driftig. Die winkeleienaar, meneer Borgin,

'n krom man met oliërige hare, kyk Malfoy met 'n vreemde uitdrukking van wrewel gemeng met vrees aan.

"As ons net kon hoor wat hulle sê!" sug Hermione.

"Ons kan!" sê Ron opgewonde. "Wag bietjie – dëmmit –"

Hy laat val 'n paar van die ander bokse wat hy vashou terwyl hy sukkel om die grootste een oop te kry.

"Verlengbare Ore, kyk!"

"Fantasties!" sê Hermione en kyk hoe Ron die lang, vleeskleurige toue losknoop en onder die deur begin deurdruk. "O, ek hoop nie die deur is Onversteurbaar nie ..."

"Nee!" sê Ron ingenome. "Luister!"

Hulle sit hul koppe by mekaar en hou hul ore by die punte van die toue waardeur hulle Malfoy se stem so hard en duidelik kan hoor asof iemand so pas 'n radio aangeskakel het.

"... en weet jy hoe om dit reg te maak?"

"Moontlik," sê Borgin in 'n stemtoon wat suggereer dat hy onwillig is om hom daartoe te verbind. "Ek sal dit egter eers moet sien. Hoekom bring jy dit nie na my winkel toe nie?"

"Ek kan nie," sê Malfoy. "Dit moet bly waar dit is. Jy moet net vir my sê hoe om dit te doen."

Harry sien hoe Borgin sy lippe gespanne aflek.

"Wel, sonder dat ek dit gesien het, sal dit baie moeilik wees, dalk selfs onmoontlik. Ek kan niks waarborg nie."

"Nie?" vra Malfoy en aan die manier waarop hy dit sê, weet Harry hy praat smalend. "Miskien sal dit jou meer selfvertroue gee."

Hy beweeg nader aan Borgin en word deur die kabinet verberg. Harry, Ron en Hermione skuif sywaarts om hom in die oog te hou, maar al wat hulle kan sien, is Borgin se vreesbevange gesig.

"As jy enigiemand hiervan vertel," sê Malfoy, "sal jy daarvoor boet. Ken jy vir Fenrir Greyback? Hy's 'n familiëvriend; hy sal van tyd tot tyd hier kom inloer om seker te maak jy gee jou volle aandag aan die probleem."

"Dit sal nie nodig wees om –"

"Ek sal daaroor besluit," sê Malfoy. "Wel, ek moet loop. En moenie vergeet om *daardie* een veilig te bewaar nie. Ek gaan dit nodig kry."

"Wil jy dit nie sommer nou vat nie?"

"Nee, natuurlik nie, jou simpel ou man. Hoe sal ek lyk as ek dit in die straat af dra? Moet dit net nie verkoop nie."

"Natuurlik nie ... meneer."

Borgin buig laag soos Harry hom ook die keer voor Lucius Malfoy sien doen het.

“Nie ’n woord vir enigiemand nie, Borgin, en dit sluit my ma in, verstaan jy?”

“Natuurlik, natuurlik,” mompel Borgin en buig weer.

Die volgende oomblik klinkel die deurklokkie hard en kom Malfoy met ’n selfvoldane glimlag by die winkel uit. Hy loop so naby aan Harry, Ron en Hermione verby dat hulle die mantel om hul knieë voel ritsel. In die winkel staan Borgin vasgenael. Sy kruiperige glimlag het verdwyn; hy lyk bekommerd.

“Waaroor het dit gegaan?” fluister Ron terwyl hy die Verlengbare Ore oprol. “Weet nie,” sê Harry en dink hard. “Hy wil iets reggemaak hê ... en hy wil hê Borgin moet iets daar binne vir hom hou ... Kon julle sien waarna hy gewys het toe hy gesê het: ‘daai een?’”

“Nee, hy was agter die kabinet –”

“Bly julle twee hier,” fluister Hermione.

“Wat gaan jy –?”

Maar Hermione het al klaar onder die mantel uitgeduik. Sy kyk in die glas se weerkaatsing of haar hare netjies is en loop dan by die winkel in terwyl die klokkie tingel. Ron hou die Verlengbare Ore dadelik weer onder by die deur en gee een van die toue vir Harry.

“Hallo, aaklige oggend, nè?” sê Hermione vrolik vir Borgin. Hy antwoord nie en kyk haar agterdogtig aan. Hermione neurie opgewek en drentel deur die warboel goed wat daar vertoon word.

“Is hierdie halssnoer te koop?” vra sy en gaan staan by ’n vertoonkas met ’n glasdeur.

“As jy een-en-’n-half duisend Galjoene het,” sê Borgin kil.

“O – e – nee, ek het nie soveel nie,” sê Hermione en stap verder. “En ... wat van hierdie lieflike – e – skedel?”

“Sestien Galjoene.”

“So dit is te koop? Dit word nie dalk ... vir iemand gehou nie?”

Borgin gee haar ’n skewe kyk. Harry kry die nare gevoel hy weet presies wat Hermione in die mou voer. Asof sy weet hy weet, gooi sy alle versigtigheid oorboord.

“Die ding is, daai – e – ou wat nou net hier was, Draco Malfoy, wel, hy’s ’n vriend van my en ek wil vir hom ’n verjaardagpresent kry, maar as hy al klaar vir u gevra het om iets vir hom uit te hou wil ek nie vir hom dieselfde ding koop nie, so ... e ...”

Dit is wat Harry betref ’n baie onoortuigende storie en skynbaar dink Borgin ook so.

“Uit,” sê hy skril. “Uit hier!”

Hermione laat haar nie twee keer nooi nie en mik haastig deur toe met Borgin op haar hakke. Die klokkie tingel weer, Borgin klap die deur agter haar toe en sit die “Gesluit”-bordjie op.

“Ag, nou ja,” sê Ron terwyl hy die mantel weer oor Hermione gooi, “dit was die moeite werd om te probeer, maar jy was ’n bietjie deursigtig —”

“Wel, volgende keer kan jy vir my wys hoe dit gedoen moet word, meneer Beterweet!” vlieg sy hom in.

Ron en Hermione stry heelpad terug na Weasleys se Wonderpoetse, waar hulle gedwing word om op te hou sodat hulle ongemerk verby ’n baie angstige mevrou Weasley en Hagrid, wat duidelik agtergekom het hulle is weg, kan glip. Toe hulle terug in die winkel is, pluk Harry die Onsigbaarheidsmantel van hulle af, steek dit in sy sak weg en sluit aan by die ander twee wat in antwoord op mevrou Weasley se aantygings volhou dat hulle die hele tyd in die agterste vertrek was en dat sy seker net nie ordentlik gekyk het nie.

CHAPTER SEVEN



THE SLUG CLUB

Harry spent a lot of the last week of the holidays pondering the meaning of Malfoy's behavior in Knockturn Alley. What disturbed him most was the satisfied look on Malfoy's face as he had left the shop. Nothing that made Malfoy look that happy could be good news. To his slight annoyance, however, neither Ron nor Hermione seemed quite as curious about Malfoy's activities as he was; or at least, they seemed to get bored of discussing it after a few days.

"Yes, I've already agreed it was fishy, Harry," said Hermione a little impatiently. She was sitting on the windowsill in Fred and George's room with her feet up on one of the cardboard boxes and

had only grudgingly looked up from her new copy of *Advanced Rune Translation*. “But haven’t we agreed there could be a lot of explanations?”

“Maybe he’s broken his Hand of Glory,” said Ron vaguely, as he attempted to straighten his broomstick’s bent tail twigs. “Remember that shriveled-up arm Malfoy had?”

“But what about when he said, ‘Don’t forget to keep *that* one safe’?” asked Harry for the umpteenth time. “That sounded to me like Borgin’s got another one of the broken objects, and Malfoy wants both.”

“You reckon?” said Ron, now trying to scrape some dirt off his broom handle.

“Yeah, I do,” said Harry. When neither Ron nor Hermione answered, he said, “Malfoy’s father’s in Azkaban. Don’t you think Malfoy’d like revenge?”

Ron looked up, blinking.

“Malfoy, revenge? What can he do about it?”

“That’s my point, I don’t know!” said Harry, frustrated. “But he’s up to something and I think we should take it seriously. His father’s a Death Eater and —”

Harry broke off, his eyes fixed on the window behind Hermione, his mouth open. A startling thought had just occurred to him.

“Harry?” said Hermione in an anxious voice. “What’s wrong?”

“Your scar’s not hurting again, is it?” asked Ron nervously.

“He’s a Death Eater,” said Harry slowly. “He’s replaced his father as a Death Eater!”

There was a silence; then Ron erupted in laughter. “*Malfoy?* He’s

sixteen, Harry! You think You-Know-Who would let *Malfoy* join?"

"It seems very unlikely, Harry," said Hermione in a repressive sort of voice. "What makes you think — ?"

"In Madam Malkin's. She didn't touch him, but he yelled and jerked his arm away from her when she went to roll up his sleeve. It was his left arm. He's been branded with the Dark Mark."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other.

"Well . . ." said Ron, sounding thoroughly unconvinced.

"I think he just wanted to get out of there, Harry," said Hermione.

"He showed Borgin something we couldn't see," Harry pressed on stubbornly. "Something that seriously scared Borgin. It was the Mark, I know it — he was showing Borgin who he was dealing with, you saw how seriously Borgin took him!"

Ron and Hermione exchanged another look.

"I'm not sure, Harry. . . ."

"Yeah, I still don't reckon You-Know-Who would let Malfoy join. . . ."

Annoyed, but absolutely convinced he was right, Harry snatched up a pile of filthy Quidditch robes and left the room; Mrs. Weasley had been urging them for days not to leave their washing and packing until the last moment. On the landing he bumped into Ginny, who was returning to her room carrying a pile of freshly laundered clothes.

"I wouldn't go in the kitchen just now," she warned him. "There's a lot of Phlegm around."

"I'll be careful not to slip in it." Harry smiled.

Sure enough, when he entered the kitchen it was to find Fleur sitting at the kitchen table, in full flow about plans for her wedding to

Bill, while Mrs. Weasley kept watch over a pile of self-peeling sprouts, looking bad-tempered.

“... Bill and I ’ave almost decided on only two bridesmaids, Ginny and Gabrielle will look very sweet togezzer. I am theenking of dressing zem in pale gold — pink would of course be ’orrible with Ginny’s ’air —”

“Ah, Harry!” said Mrs. Weasley loudly, cutting across Fleur’s monologue. “Good, I wanted to explain about the security arrangements for the journey to Hogwarts tomorrow. We’ve got Ministry cars again, and there will be Aurors waiting at the station —”

“Is Tonks going to be there?” asked Harry, handing over his Quidditch things.

“No, I don’t think so, she’s been stationed somewhere else from what Arthur said.”

“She has let ’erself go, zat Tonks,” Fleur mused, examining her own stunning reflection in the back of a teaspoon. “A big mistake if you ask —”

“Yes, *thank* you,” said Mrs. Weasley tartly, cutting across Fleur again. “You’d better get on, Harry, I want the trunks ready tonight, if possible, so we don’t have the usual last-minute scramble.”

And in fact, their departure the following morning was smoother than usual. The Ministry cars glided up to the front of the Burrow to find them waiting, trunks packed; Hermione’s cat, Crookshanks, safely enclosed in his traveling basket; and Hedwig, Ron’s owl, Pigwidgeon; and Ginny’s new purple Pygmy Puff, Arnold, in cages.

“Au revoir, ’Arry,” said Fleur throatily, kissing him good-bye. Ron

hurried forward, looking hopeful, but Ginny stuck out her foot and Ron fell, sprawling in the dust at Fleur's feet. Furious, red-faced, and dirt-spattered, he hurried into the car without saying good-bye.

There was no cheerful Hagrid waiting for them at King's Cross Station. Instead, two grim-faced, bearded Aurors in dark Muggle suits moved forward the moment the cars stopped and, flanking the party, marched them into the station without speaking.

"Quick, quick, through the barrier," said Mrs. Weasley, who seemed a little flustered by this austere efficiency. "Harry had better go first, with —"

She looked inquiringly at one of the Aurors, who nodded briefly, seized Harry's upper arm, and attempted to steer him toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten.

"I can walk, thanks," said Harry irritably, jerking his arm out of the Auror's grip. He pushed his trolley directly at the solid barrier, ignoring his silent companion, and found himself, a second later, standing on platform nine and three-quarters, where the scarlet Hogwarts Express stood belching steam over the crowd.

Hermione and the Weasleys joined him within seconds. Without waiting to consult his grim-faced Auror, Harry motioned to Ron and Hermione to follow him up the platform, looking for an empty compartment.

"We can't, Harry," said Hermione, looking apologetic. "Ron and I've got to go to the prefects' carriage first and then patrol the corridors for a bit."

"Oh yeah, I forgot," said Harry.

"You'd better get straight on the train, all of you, you've only got a

few minutes to go,” said Mrs. Weasley, consulting her watch. “Well, have a lovely term, Ron. . . .”

“Mr. Weasley, can I have a quick word?” said Harry, making up his mind on the spur of the moment.

“Of course,” said Mr. Weasley, who looked slightly surprised, but followed Harry out of earshot of the others nevertheless.

Harry had thought it through carefully and come to the conclusion that, if he was to tell anyone, Mr. Weasley was the right person; firstly, because he worked at the Ministry and was therefore in the best position to make further investigations, and secondly, because he thought that there was not too much risk of Mr. Weasley exploding with anger.

He could see Mrs. Weasley and the grim-faced Auror casting the pair of them suspicious looks as they moved away.

“When we were in Diagon Alley,” Harry began, but Mr. Weasley forestalled him with a grimace.

“Am I about to discover where you, Ron, and Hermione disappeared to while you were supposed to be in the back room of Fred and George’s shop?”

“How did you — ?”

“Harry, please. You’re talking to the man who raised Fred and George.”

“Er . . . yeah, all right, we weren’t in the back room.”

“Very well, then, let’s hear the worst.”

“Well, we followed Draco Malfoy. We used my Invisibility Cloak.”

“Did you have any particular reason for doing so, or was it a mere

whim?”

“Because I thought Malfoy was up to something,” said Harry, disregarding Mr. Weasley’s look of mingled exasperation and amusement. “He’d given his mother the slip and I wanted to know why.”

“Of course you did,” said Mr. Weasley, sounding resigned. “Well? Did you find out why?”

“He went into Borgin and Burkes,” said Harry, “and started bullying the bloke in there, Borgin, to help him fix something. And he said he wanted Borgin to keep something else for him. He made it sound like it was the same kind of thing that needed fixing. Like they were a pair. And . . .”

Harry took a deep breath.

“There’s something else. We saw Malfoy jump about a mile when Madam Malkin tried to touch his left arm. I think he’s been branded with the Dark Mark. I think he’s replaced his father as a Death Eater.”

Mr. Weasley looked taken aback. After a moment he said, “Harry, I doubt whether You-Know-Who would allow a sixteen-year-old —”

“Does anyone really know what You-Know-Who would or wouldn’t do?” asked Harry angrily. “Mr. Weasley, I’m sorry, but isn’t it worth investigating? If Malfoy wants something fixing, and he needs to threaten Borgin to get it done, it’s probably something Dark or dangerous, isn’t it?”

“I doubt it, to be honest, Harry,” said Mr. Weasley slowly. “You see, when Lucius Malfoy was arrested, we raided his house. We took away everything that might have been dangerous.”

“I think you missed something,” said Harry stubbornly.

“Well, maybe,” said Mr. Weasley, but Harry could tell that Mr. Weasley was humoring him.

There was a whistle behind them; nearly everyone had boarded the train and the doors were closing.

“You’d better hurry,” said Mr. Weasley, as Mrs. Weasley cried, “Harry, quickly!”

He hurried forward and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley helped him load his trunk onto the train.

“Now, dear, you’re coming to us for Christmas, it’s all fixed with Dumbledore, so we’ll see you quite soon,” said Mrs. Weasley through the window, as Harry slammed the door shut behind him and the train began to move. “You make sure you look after yourself and —”

The train was gathering speed.

“— be good and —”

She was jogging to keep up now.

“— stay safe!”

Harry waved until the train had turned a corner and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were lost to view, then turned to see where the others had got to. He supposed Ron and Hermione were cloistered in the prefects’ carriage, but Ginny was a little way along the corridor, chatting to some friends. He made his way toward her, dragging his trunk.

People stared shamelessly as he approached. They even pressed their faces against the windows of their compartments to get a look at him. He had expected an upswing in the amount of gaping and

gawping he would have to endure this term after all the “Chosen One” rumors in the *Daily Prophet*, but he did not enjoy the sensation of standing in a very bright spotlight. He tapped Ginny on the shoulder.

“Fancy trying to find a compartment?”

“I can’t, Harry, I said I’d meet Dean,” said Ginny brightly. “See you later.”

“Right,” said Harry. He felt a strange twinge of annoyance as she walked away, her long red hair dancing behind her; he had become so used to her presence over the summer that he had almost forgotten that Ginny did not hang around with him, Ron, and Hermione while at school. Then he blinked and looked around: He was surrounded by mesmerized girls.

“Hi, Harry!” said a familiar voice from behind him.

“Neville!” said Harry in relief, turning to see a round-faced boy struggling toward him.

“Hello, Harry,” said a girl with long hair and large misty eyes, who was just behind Neville.

“Luna, hi, how are you?”

“Very well, thank you,” said Luna. She was clutching a magazine to her chest; large letters on the front announced that there was a pair of free Spectrespecs inside.

“*Quibbler* still going strong, then?” asked Harry, who felt a certain fondness for the magazine, having given it an exclusive interview the previous year.

“Oh yes, circulation’s well up,” said Luna happily.

“Let’s find seats,” said Harry, and the three of them set off along

the train through hordes of silently staring students. At last they found an empty compartment, and Harry hurried inside gratefully.

“They’re even staring at *us*!” said Neville, indicating himself and Luna. “Because we’re with you!”

“They’re staring at you because you were at the Ministry too,” said Harry, as he hoisted his trunk into the luggage rack. “Our little adventure there was all over the *Daily Prophet*, you must’ve seen it.”

“Yes, I thought Gran would be angry about all the publicity,” said Neville, “but she was really pleased. Says I’m starting to live up to my dad at long last. She bought me a new wand, look!”

He pulled it out and showed it to Harry.

“Cherry and unicorn hair,” he said proudly. “We think it was one of the last Ollivander ever sold, he vanished next day — oi, come back here, Trevor!”

And he dived under the seat to retrieve his toad as it made one of its frequent bids for freedom.

“Are we still doing D.A. meetings this year, Harry?” asked Luna, who was detaching a pair of psychedelic spectacles from the middle of *The Quibbler*.

“No point now we’ve got rid of Umbridge, is there?” said Harry, sitting down. Neville bumped his head against the seat as he emerged from under it. He looked most disappointed.

“I liked the D.A.! I learned loads with you!”

“I enjoyed the meetings too,” said Luna serenely. “It was like having friends.”

This was one of those uncomfortable things Luna often said and which made Harry feel a squirming mixture of pity and

embarrassment. Before he could respond, however, there was a disturbance outside their compartment door; a group of fourth-year girls was whispering and giggling together on the other side of the glass.

“You ask him!”

“No, you!”

“I’ll do it!”

And one of them, a bold-looking girl with large dark eyes, a prominent chin, and long black hair pushed her way through the door.

“Hi, Harry, I’m Romilda, Romilda Vane,” she said loudly and confidently. “Why don’t you join us in our compartment? You don’t have to sit with *them*,” she added in a stage whisper, indicating Neville’s bottom, which was sticking out from under the seat again as he groped around for Trevor, and Luna, who was now wearing her free Spectrespecs, which gave her the look of a demented, multicolored owl.

“They’re friends of mine,” said Harry coldly.

“Oh,” said the girl, looking very surprised. “Oh. Okay.”

And she withdrew, sliding the door closed behind her.

“People expect you to have cooler friends than us,” said Luna, once again displaying her knack for embarrassing honesty.

“You are cool,” said Harry shortly. “None of them was at the Ministry. They didn’t fight with me.”

“That’s a very nice thing to say,” beamed Luna. Then she pushed her Spectrespecs farther up her nose and settled down to read *The Quibbler*.

“We didn’t face *him*, though,” said Neville, emerging from under

the seat with fluff and dust in his hair and a resigned-looking Trevor in his hand. “You did. You should hear my gran talk about you. *‘That Harry Potter’s got more backbone than the whole Ministry of Magic put together!’* She’d give anything to have you as a grandson. . . .”

Harry laughed uncomfortably and changed the subject to O.W.L. results as soon as he could. While Neville recited his grades and wondered aloud whether he would be allowed to take a Transfiguration N.E.W.T. with only an “Acceptable,” Harry watched him without really listening.

Neville’s childhood had been blighted by Voldemort just as much as Harry’s had, but Neville had no idea how close he had come to having Harry’s destiny. The prophecy could have referred to either of them, yet, for his own inscrutable reasons, Voldemort had chosen to believe that Harry was the one meant.

Had Voldemort chosen Neville, it would be Neville sitting opposite Harry bearing the lightning-shaped scar and the weight of the prophecy. . . . Or would it? Would Neville’s mother have died to save him, as Lily had died for Harry? Surely she would. . . . But what if she had been unable to stand between her son and Voldemort? Would there then have been no “Chosen One” at all? An empty seat where Neville now sat and a scarless Harry who would have been kissed good-bye by his own mother, not Ron’s?

“You all right, Harry? You look funny,” said Neville.

Harry started. “Sorry — I —”

“Wrackspurt got you?” asked Luna sympathetically, peering at Harry through her enormous colored spectacles.

“I — what?”

“A Wrackspurt . . . They’re invisible. They float in through your ears and make your brain go fuzzy,” she said. “I thought I felt one zooming around in here.”

She flapped her hands at thin air, as though beating off large invisible moths. Harry and Neville caught each other’s eyes and hastily began to talk of Quidditch.

The weather beyond the train windows was as patchy as it had been all summer; they passed through stretches of the chilling mist, then out into weak, clear sunlight. It was during one of the clear spells, when the sun was visible almost directly overhead, that Ron and Hermione entered the compartment at last.

“Wish the lunch trolley would hurry up, I’m starving,” said Ron longingly, slumping into the seat beside Harry and rubbing his stomach. “Hi, Neville. Hi, Luna. Guess what?” he added, turning to Harry. “Malfoy’s not doing prefect duty. He’s just sitting in his compartment with the other Slytherins, we saw him when we passed.”

Harry sat up straight, interested. It was not like Malfoy to pass up the chance to demonstrate his power as prefect, which he had happily abused all the previous year.

“What did he do when he saw you?”

“The usual,” said Ron indifferently, demonstrating a rude hand gesture. “Not like him, though, is it? Well — *that* is” — he did the hand gesture again — “but why isn’t he out there bullying first years?”

“Dunno,” said Harry, but his mind was racing. Didn’t this look as

though Malfoy had more important things on his mind than bullying younger students?

“Maybe he preferred the Inquisitorial Squad,” said Hermione. “Maybe being a prefect seems a bit tame after that.”

“I don’t think so,” said Harry. “I think he’s —”

But before he could expound on his theory, the compartment door slid open again and a breathless third-year girl stepped inside.

“I’m supposed to deliver these to Neville Longbottom and Harry P-Potter,” she faltered, as her eyes met Harry’s and she turned scarlet. She was holding out two scrolls of parchment tied with violet ribbon. Perplexed, Harry and Neville took the scroll addressed to each of them and the girl stumbled back out of the compartment.

“What is it?” Ron demanded, as Harry unrolled his.

“An invitation,” said Harry.

Harry,

I would be delighted if you would join me for a bite of lunch in compartment C.

Sincerely,

Professor H.E.F. Slughorn

“Who’s Professor Slughorn?” asked Neville, looking perplexedly at his own invitation.

“New teacher,” said Harry. “Well, I suppose we’ll have to go, won’t we?”

“But what does he want me for?” asked Neville nervously, as

though he was expecting detention.

“No idea,” said Harry, which was not entirely true, though he had no proof yet that his hunch was correct. “Listen,” he added, seized by a sudden brain wave, “let’s go under the Invisibility Cloak, then we might get a good look at Malfoy on the way, see what he’s up to.”

This idea, however, came to nothing: The corridors, which were packed with people on the lookout for the lunch trolley, were impossible to negotiate while wearing the Cloak. Harry stowed it regretfully back in his bag, reflecting that it would have been nice to wear it just to avoid all the staring, which seemed to have increased in intensity even since he had last walked down the train. Every now and then, students would hurtle out of their compartments to get a better look at him. The exception was Cho Chang, who darted into her compartment when she saw Harry coming. As Harry passed the window, he saw her deep in determined conversation with her friend Marietta, who was wearing a very thick layer of makeup that did not entirely obscure the odd formation of pimples still etched across her face. Smirking slightly, Harry pushed on.

When they reached compartment C, they saw at once that they were not Slughorn’s only invitees, although judging by the enthusiasm of Slughorn’s welcome, Harry was the most warmly anticipated.

“Harry, m’boy!” said Slughorn, jumping up at the sight of him so that his great velvet-covered belly seemed to fill all the remaining space in the compartment. His shiny bald head and great silvery mustache gleamed as brightly in the sunlight as the golden buttons on his waistcoat. “Good to see you, good to see you! And you must be Mr. Longbottom!”

Neville nodded, looking scared. At a gesture from Slughorn, they sat down opposite each other in the only two empty seats, which were nearest the door. Harry glanced around at their fellow guests. He recognized a Slytherin from their year, a tall black boy with high cheekbones and long, slanting eyes; there were also two seventh-year boys Harry did not know and, squashed in the corner beside Slughorn and looking as though she was not entirely sure how she had got there, Ginny.

“Now, do you know everyone?” Slughorn asked Harry and Neville. “Blaise Zabini is in your year, of course —”

Zabini did not make any sign of recognition or greeting, nor did Harry or Neville: Gryffindor and Slytherin students loathed each other on principle.

“This is Cormac McLaggen, perhaps you’ve come across each other — ? No?”

McLaggen, a large, wiry-haired youth, raised a hand, and Harry and Neville nodded back at him.

“— and this is Marcus Belby, I don’t know whether — ?”

Belby, who was thin and nervous-looking, gave a strained smile.

“— and *this* charming young lady tells me she knows you!” Slughorn finished.

Ginny grimaced at Harry and Neville from behind Slughorn’s back.

“Well now, this is most pleasant,” said Slughorn cozily. “A chance to get to know you all a little better. Here, take a napkin. I’ve packed my own lunch; the trolley, as I remember it, is heavy on licorice wands, and a poor old man’s digestive system isn’t quite up to such

things. . . . Pheasant, Belby?”

Belby started and accepted what looked like half a cold pheasant.

“I was just telling young Marcus here that I had the pleasure of teaching his Uncle Damocles,” Slughorn told Harry and Neville, now passing around a basket of rolls. “Outstanding wizard, outstanding, and his Order of Merlin most well-deserved. Do you see much of your uncle, Marcus?”

Unfortunately, Belby had just taken a large mouthful of pheasant; in his haste to answer Slughorn he swallowed too fast, turned purple, and began to choke.

“*Anapneo*,” said Slughorn calmly, pointing his wand at Belby, whose airway seemed to clear at once.

“Not . . . not much of him, no,” gasped Belby, his eyes streaming.

“Well, of course, I daresay he’s busy,” said Slughorn, looking questioningly at Belby. “I doubt he invented the Wolfsbane Potion without considerable hard work!”

“I suppose . . .” said Belby, who seemed afraid to take another bite of pheasant until he was sure that Slughorn had finished with him. “Er . . . he and my dad don’t get on very well, you see, so I don’t really know much about . . .”

His voice tailed away as Slughorn gave him a cold smile and turned to McLaggen instead.

“Now, *you*, Cormac,” said Slughorn, “I happen to know you see a lot of your Uncle Tiberius, because he has a rather splendid picture of the two of you hunting nogtails in, I think, Norfolk?”

“Oh, yeah, that was fun, that was,” said McLaggen. “We went with Bertie Higgs and Rufus Scrimgeour — this was before he became

Minister, obviously —”

“Ah, you know Bertie and Rufus too?” beamed Slughorn, now offering around a small tray of pies; somehow, Belby was missed out. “Now tell me . . .”

It was as Harry had suspected. Everyone here seemed to have been invited because they were connected to somebody well-known or influential — everyone except Ginny. Zabini, who was interrogated after McLaggen, turned out to have a famously beautiful witch for a mother (from what Harry could make out, she had been married seven times, each of her husbands dying mysteriously and leaving her mounds of gold). It was Neville’s turn next: This was a very uncomfortable ten minutes, for Neville’s parents, well-known Aurors, had been tortured into insanity by Bellatrix Lestrange and a couple of Death Eater cronies. At the end of Neville’s interview, Harry had the impression that Slughorn was reserving judgment on Neville, yet to see whether he had any of his parents’ flair.

“And now,” said Slughorn, shifting massively in his seat with the air of a compere introducing his star act. “Harry Potter! *Where* to begin? I feel I barely scratched the surface when we met over the summer!” He contemplated Harry for a moment as though he was a particularly large and succulent piece of pheasant, then said, “‘The Chosen One,’ they’re calling you now!”

Harry said nothing. Belby, McLaggen, and Zabini were all staring at him.

“Of course,” said Slughorn, watching Harry closely, “there have been rumors for years. . . . I remember when — well — after that *terrible* night — Lily — James — and you survived — and the word

was that you must have powers beyond the ordinary —”

Zabini gave a tiny little cough that was clearly supposed to indicate amused skepticism. An angry voice burst out from behind Slughorn.

“Yeah, Zabini, because *you’re* so talented . . . at posing. . . .”

“Oh dear!” chuckled Slughorn comfortably, looking around at Ginny, who was glaring at Zabini around Slughorn’s great belly. “You want to be careful, Blaise! I saw this young lady perform the most marvelous Bat-Bogey Hex as I was passing her carriage! I wouldn’t cross her!”

Zabini merely looked contemptuous.

“Anyway,” said Slughorn, turning back to Harry. “*Such* rumors this summer. Of course, one doesn’t know what to believe, the *Prophet* has been known to print inaccuracies, make mistakes — but there seems little doubt, given the number of witnesses, that there was *quite* a disturbance at the Ministry and that you were there in the thick of it all!”

Harry, who could not see any way out of this without flatly lying, nodded but still said nothing. Slughorn beamed at him.

“So modest, so modest, no wonder Dumbledore is so fond — you *were* there, then? But the rest of the stories — so sensational, of course, one doesn’t know quite what to believe — this fabled prophecy, for instance —”

“We never heard a prophecy,” said Neville, turning geranium pink as he said it.

“That’s right,” said Ginny staunchly. “Neville and I were both there too, and all this ‘Chosen One’ rubbish is just the *Prophet*

making things up as usual.”

“You were both there too, were you?” said Slughorn with great interest, looking from Ginny to Neville, but both of them sat clamlike before his encouraging smile.

“Yes . . . well . . . it is true that the *Prophet* often exaggerates, of course. . . .” Slughorn said, sounding a little disappointed. “I remember dear Gwenog telling me (Gwenog Jones, I mean, of course, Captain of the Holyhead Harpies) —”

He meandered off into a long-winded reminiscence, but Harry had the distinct impression that Slughorn had not finished with him, and that he had not been convinced by Neville and Ginny.

The afternoon wore on with more anecdotes about illustrious wizards Slughorn had taught, all of whom had been delighted to join what he called the “Slug Club” at Hogwarts. Harry could not wait to leave, but couldn’t see how to do so politely. Finally the train emerged from yet another long misty stretch into a red sunset, and Slughorn looked around, blinking in the twilight.

“Good gracious, it’s getting dark already! I didn’t notice that they’d lit the lamps! You’d better go and change into your robes, all of you. McLaggen, you must drop by and borrow that book on nogtails. Harry, Blaise — any time you’re passing. Same goes for you, miss,” he twinkled at Ginny. “Well, off you go, off you go!”

As he pushed past Harry into the darkening corridor, Zabini shot him a filthy look that Harry returned with interest. He, Ginny, and Neville followed Zabini back along the train.

“I’m glad that’s over,” muttered Neville. “Strange man, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he is a bit,” said Harry, his eyes on Zabini. “How come you

ended up in there, Ginny?”

“He saw me hex Zacharias Smith,” said Ginny. “You remember that idiot from Hufflepuff who was in the D.A.? He kept on and on asking about what happened at the Ministry and in the end he annoyed me so much I hexed him — when Slughorn came in I thought I was going to get detention, but he just thought it was a really good hex and invited me to lunch! Mad, eh?”

“Better reason for inviting someone than because their mother’s famous,” said Harry, scowling at the back of Zabini’s head, “or because their uncle —”

But he broke off. An idea had just occurred to him, a reckless but potentially wonderful idea. . . . In a minute’s time, Zabini was going to reenter the Slytherin sixth-year compartment and Malfoy would be sitting there, thinking himself unheard by anybody except fellow Slytherins. . . . If Harry could only enter, unseen, behind him, what might he not see or hear? True, there was little of the journey left — Hogsmeade Station had to be less than half an hour away, judging by the wildness of the scenery flashing by the windows — but nobody else seemed prepared to take Harry’s suspicions seriously, so it was down to him to prove them.

“I’ll see you two later,” said Harry under his breath, pulling out his Invisibility Cloak and flinging it over himself.

“But what’re you — ?” asked Neville.

“Later!” whispered Harry, darting after Zabini as quietly as possible, though the rattling of the train made such caution almost pointless.

The corridors were almost completely empty now. Nearly

everyone had returned to their carriages to change into their school robes and pack up their possessions. Though he was as close as he could get to Zabini without touching him, Harry was not quick enough to slip into the compartment when Zabini opened the door. Zabini was already sliding it shut when Harry hastily stuck out his foot to prevent it closing.

“What’s wrong with this thing?” said Zabini angrily as he smashed the sliding door repeatedly into Harry’s foot.

Harry seized the door and pushed it open, hard; Zabini, still clinging on to the handle, toppled over sideways into Gregory Goyle’s lap, and in the ensuing ruckus, Harry darted into the compartment, leapt onto Zabini’s temporarily empty seat, and hoisted himself up into the luggage rack. It was fortunate that Goyle and Zabini were snarling at each other, drawing all eyes onto them, for Harry was quite sure his feet and ankles had been revealed as the Cloak had flapped around them; indeed, for one horrible moment he thought he saw Malfoy’s eyes follow his trainer as it whipped upward out of sight. But then Goyle slammed the door shut and flung Zabini off him; Zabini collapsed into his own seat looking ruffled, Vincent Crabbe returned to his comic, and Malfoy, sniggering, lay back down across two seats with his head in Pansy Parkinson’s lap. Harry lay curled uncomfortably under the Cloak to ensure that every inch of him remained hidden, and watched Pansy stroke the sleek blond hair off Malfoy’s forehead, smirking as she did so, as though anyone would have loved to have been in her place. The lanterns swinging from the carriage ceiling cast a bright light over the scene: Harry could read every word of Crabbe’s comic directly below him.

“So, Zabini,” said Malfoy, “what did Slughorn want?”

“Just trying to make up to well-connected people,” said Zabini, who was still glowering at Goyle. “Not that he managed to find many.”

This information did not seem to please Malfoy.

“Who else had he invited?” he demanded.

“McLaggen from Gryffindor,” said Zabini.

“Oh yeah, his uncle’s big in the Ministry,” said Malfoy.

“— someone else called Belby, from Ravenclaw —”

“Not him, he’s a prat!” said Pansy.

“— and Longbottom, Potter, and that Weasley girl,” finished Zabini.

Malfoy sat up very suddenly, knocking Pansy’s hand aside.

“He invited *Longbottom*?”

“Well, I assume so, as Longbottom was there,” said Zabini indifferently.

“What’s Longbottom got to interest Slughorn?”

Zabini shrugged.

“Potter, precious Potter, obviously he wanted a look at *‘the Chosen One,’*” sneered Malfoy, “but that Weasley girl! What’s so special about *her*?”

“A lot of boys like her,” said Pansy, watching Malfoy out of the corner of her eyes for his reaction. “Even you think she’s good-looking, don’t you, Blaise, and we all know how hard you are to please!”

“I wouldn’t touch a filthy little blood traitor like her whatever she

looked like,” said Zabini coldly, and Pansy looked pleased. Malfoy sank back across her lap and allowed her to resume the stroking of his hair.

“Well, I pity Slughorn’s taste. Maybe he’s going a bit senile. Shame, my father always said he was a good wizard in his day. My father used to be a bit of a favorite of his. Slughorn probably hasn’t heard I’m on the train, or —”

“I wouldn’t bank on an invitation,” said Zabini. “He asked me about Nott’s father when I first arrived. They used to be old friends, apparently, but when he heard he’d been caught at the Ministry he didn’t look happy, and Nott didn’t get an invitation, did he? I don’t think Slughorn’s interested in Death Eaters.”

Malfoy looked angry, but forced out a singularly humorless laugh.

“Well, who cares what he’s interested in? What is he, when you come down to it? Just some stupid teacher.” Malfoy yawned ostentatiously. “I mean, I might not even be at Hogwarts next year, what’s it matter to me if some fat old has-been likes me or not?”

“What do you mean, you might not be at Hogwarts next year?” said Pansy indignantly, ceasing grooming Malfoy at once.

“Well, you never know,” said Malfoy with the ghost of a smirk. “I might have — er — moved on to bigger and better things.”

Crouched in the luggage rack under his Cloak, Harry’s heart began to race. What would Ron and Hermione say about this? Crabbe and Goyle were gawping at Malfoy; apparently they had had no inkling of any plans to move on to bigger and better things. Even Zabini had allowed a look of curiosity to mar his haughty features. Pansy resumed the slow stroking of Malfoy’s hair, looking dumbfounded.

“Do you mean — *Him*?”

Malfoy shrugged.

“Mother wants me to complete my education, but personally, I don’t see it as that important these days. I mean, think about it. . . . When the Dark Lord takes over, is he going to care how many O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s anyone’s got? Of course he isn’t. . . . It’ll be all about the kind of service he received, the level of devotion he was shown.”

“And you think *you’ll* be able to do something for him?” asked Zabini scathingly. “Sixteen years old and not even fully qualified yet?”

“I’ve just said, haven’t I? Maybe he doesn’t care if I’m qualified. Maybe the job he wants me to do isn’t something that you need to be qualified for,” said Malfoy quietly.

Crabbe and Goyle were both sitting with their mouths open like gargoyles. Pansy was gazing down at Malfoy as though she had never seen anything so awe-inspiring.

“I can see Hogwarts,” said Malfoy, clearly relishing the effect he had created as he pointed out of the blackened window. “We’d better get our robes on.”

Harry was so busy staring at Malfoy, he did not notice Goyle reaching up for his trunk; as he swung it down, it hit Harry hard on the side of the head. He let out an involuntary gasp of pain, and Malfoy looked up at the luggage rack, frowning.

Harry was not afraid of Malfoy, but he still did not much like the idea of being discovered hiding under his Invisibility Cloak by a group of unfriendly Slytherins. Eyes still watering and head still

throbbing, he drew his wand, careful not to disarrange the Cloak, and waited, breath held. To his relief, Malfoy seemed to decide that he had imagined the noise; he pulled on his robes like the others, locked his trunk, and as the train slowed to a jerky crawl, fastened a thick new traveling cloak round his neck.

Harry could see the corridors filling up again and hoped that Hermione and Ron would take his things out onto the platform for him; he was stuck where he was until the compartment had quite emptied. At last, with a final lurch, the train came to a complete halt. Goyle threw the door open and muscled his way out into a crowd of second years, punching them aside; Crabbe and Zabini followed.

“You go on,” Malfoy told Pansy, who was waiting for him with her hand held out as though hoping he would hold it. “I just want to check something.”

Pansy left. Now Harry and Malfoy were alone in the compartment. People were filing past, descending onto the dark platform. Malfoy moved over to the compartment door and let down the blinds, so that people in the corridor beyond could not peer in. He then bent down over his trunk and opened it again.

Harry peered down over the edge of the luggage rack, his heart pumping a little faster. What had Malfoy wanted to hide from Pansy? Was he about to see the mysterious broken object it was so important to mend?

“Petrificus Totalus!”

Without warning, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry, who was instantly paralyzed. As though in slow motion, he toppled out of the luggage rack and fell, with an agonizing, floor-shaking crash, at

Malfoy's feet, the Invisibility Cloak trapped beneath him, his whole body revealed with his legs still curled absurdly into the cramped kneeling position. He couldn't move a muscle; he could only gaze up at Malfoy, who smiled broadly.

"I thought so," he said jubilantly. "I heard Goyle's trunk hit you. And I thought I saw something white flash through the air after Zabini came back. . . ."

His eyes lingered for a moment upon Harry's trainers.

"You didn't hear anything I care about, Potter. But while I've got you here . . ."

And he stamped, hard, on Harry's face. Harry felt his nose break; blood spurted everywhere.

"That's from my father. Now, let's see. . . ."

Malfoy dragged the Cloak out from under Harry's immobilized body and threw it over him.

"I don't reckon they'll find you till the train's back in London," he said quietly. "See you around, Potter . . . or not."

And taking care to tread on Harry's fingers, Malfoy left the compartment.

Die Slakkeklub

Die laaste week van die vakansie wonder Harry aanhoudend oor Malfoy se eienaardige gedrag in Nagliedsteeg. Wat hom die meeste pla, is die tevrede uitdrukking op Malfoy se gesig toe hy by die winkel uitloop het. Iets wat Malfoy so gelukkig laat lyk het, kan nie goeie nuus wees nie. Tot sy effense irritasie is Ron en Hermione glad nie so nuuskierig soos hy oor Malfoy se bedrywighede nie; of dit lyk altans ná 'n paar dae asof hulle verveeld raak wanneer hy daaroor praat.

“Ja, ek hét mos al gesê dit was verdag,” sê Hermione ietwat ongeduldig. Sy sit op die vensterbank in Fred en George se kamer met haar voete op een van die kartonbokse en het nou net teësinnig opgekyk van haar nuwe eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Rune-vertalings*. “Maar ons het saamgestem dat daar baie verklarings daarvoor kan wees.”

“Miskien het hy sy Hand van Glorie gebreek,” sê Ron ingedagte terwyl hy probeer om sy besemstok se skewe sterftakke reguit te buig. “Onthou julle hoe vreemd Malfoy se arm gelyk het?”

“Maar hoekom het hy gesê: ‘Moenie vergeet om *daardie* een veilig te bewaar nie?’” vra Harry vir die hoeveelste keer. “Dit het vir my geklink of Borgin nog een het van wat ook al gebreek het, en of Malfoy al twee wil hê.”

“Jy reken?” sê Ron, wat nou probeer om van die vullis op sy besem se handvatsel af te skraap.

“Ja, ek dink so,” sê Harry. Toe nie Ron of Hermione antwoord nie, sê hy: “Malfoy se pa is in Azkaban. Dink julle nie Malfoy wil wraak neem nie?”

Ron kyk op en knip sy oë.

“Malfoy wraak neem? Wat kan hy daaraan doen?”

“Dis juis die punt – ek weet nie!” sê Harry gefrustreerd. “Maar hy voer iets in die mou en ek dink ons moet dit ernstig opneem. Sy pa is 'n Doodseter en –”

Harry hou op praat. Sy oë is op die venster agter Hermione vas-

genaai en sy mond hang oop. 'n Skrikwekkende gedagte het hom nou net te binne geskiet.

"Harry?" sê Hermione in 'n bekommerde stem. "Wat's fout?"

"Is jou letsel weer seer?" vra Ron senuagtig.

"Hy's 'n Doodseter," sê Harry stadig. "Hy het sy pa vervang as 'n Doodseter!"

Daar is 'n oomblik stilte en dan bars Ron uit van die lag.

"*Malfoy*? Hy's sestien, Harry! Dink jy Jy-Weet-Wie sal *Malfoy* laat aansluit?"

"Dis hoogs onwaarskynlik, Harry," sê Hermione versigtig. "Wat laat jou dink – ?"

"Madame Malkin het nie aan hom geraak nie, maar hy't op haar geskree en sy arm weggeruk toe sy sy mou wou oprol. Hy's met die Donker Merk gebrandmerk."

Ron en Hermione kyk na mekaar.

"Wel ..." sê Ron en klink totaal onoortuig.

"Ek dink hy wou net daar uitkom, Harry," sê Hermione.

"Hy't vir Borgin iets gewys wat ons nie kon sien nie," hou Harry hardkoppig vol. "Iets wat Borgin lelik laat skrik het. Dit was die Merk, ek weet dit – hy het vir Borgin gewys met wie hy te doen het; julle't gesien hoe ernstig vat Borgin hom op!"

Ron en Hermione kyk weer na mekaar.

"Ek's nie so seker nie, Harry ..."

"Ja-nee, ek dink nog steeds nie Jy-Weet-Wie sou *Malfoy* laat aansluit het nie ..."

Vies, maar absoluut oortuig dat hy reg is, gryp Harry 'n hoop vuil Kwiddiek-klere en loop by die kamer uit; mevrou Weasley vra hulle nou al dae lank om nie al hul wasgoed en inpakkery tot op die nippertjie uit te stel nie. Bo-op die trap loop hy hom vas in Ginny wat 'n stapel skoongewaste klere na haar kamer toe vat.

"Bly eerder weg uit die kombuis," waarsku sy hom. "Daar's op die oomblik baie Slym."

"Ek sal sorg dat ek nie daarin gly nie," sê Harry en glimlag.

En sowaar, toe hy by die kombuis instap, sit Fleur by die tafel en babbel een stryk deur oor haar en Bill se trouplanne. Mevrou Weasley kyk hoe 'n bak groente hulself afskil en lyk in 'n slegte bui.

"... en ek en Bill het besluit ons wil twee strooimeisies hê. Ginny en Gabrielle sal tog te oulikies saam lyk. Ek dink 'ulle moet liggoud dra – pienk sal darem te aaklig by Ginny se 'are lyk."

"A, Harry!" onderbreek mevrou Weasley Fleur se alleenspraak hard. "Kom, ek wil vir jou verduidelik van die veiligheidsmaatreëls

vir môre se reis na Hogwarts. Ons gaan weer in die Ministerie se motors en twee Aurors sal ons op die stasie inwag –”

“Gaan Tonks daar wees?” vra Harry en gee vir haar sy Kwiddieklere.

“Nee, ek dink nie so nie. Uit wat Arthur sê, lei ek af sy’s iewers anders gestasioneer.”

“Sy verwaarloos ’aarself, die arme Tonks,” mymer Fleur terwyl sy haar eie beeldskone weerkaatsing in die spieël betrag. “Sy maak ’n groot fout. Ek dink sy –”

“Ja dankie,” onderbreek mevrou Weasley Fleur weer skerp. “Jy sal jou moet roer, Harry. Ek wil alles teen vanaand reg hê sodat ons nie weer die gewone mal gejaag op nommer nege-en-negentig hoef te hê nie.”

En hul vertrek die volgende oggend verloop inderdaad gladder as gewoonlik. Toe die Ministerie se motors voor Die Konynenes stilhou, wag hulle reeds met alles: hul trommels gepak, Hermione se kat, Kromskeen, veilig in ’n reismandjie toegemaak, Hedwig, Ron se Pigwidgeon, en Ginny se nuwe pers Pigmee Poffie, Arnold, in hul hokke.

“Au revoir, ’Arry,” sê Fleur met haar hees stem en soen hom tot siens. Ron kom haastig en hoopvol nader, maar Ginny steek haar voet uit en hy slaan plat op die grond voor Fleur se voete neer. Hy staan woedend, rooi in die gesig en vol stof op en gaan klim in die motor sonder om te groet.

Dit is nie die vrolike Hagrid wat hulle by King’s Cross-stasie inwag nie. Twee strak Aurors in donker Moggelpakke beweeg die oomblik dat die motors stilhou, vorentoe en loop aan weerskante van die groep by die stasiegebou in.

“Gou, gou, deur die versperring,” sê mevrou Weasley wat ’n bietjie verbouereerd lyk oor hierdie streng bewaking. “Harry moet seker eerste deurgaan, met –”

Sy kyk vraend na een van die Aurors. Hy knik dadelik, kry Harry aan die boarm beet en probeer hom na die versperring tussen perronne nege en tien stuur.

“Ek kan loop, dankie,” sê Harry geïrriteerd en ruk sy arm uit die Auror se greep los. Hy stoot sy trollie reg op die soliede versperring af, ignoreer sy stille metgesel en bevind hom sekondes later op perron nege-en-’n-driekwart waar die helderrooi Hogwarts Express stoom oor die skare uitblaas.

Hermione en die Weasleys sluit sekondes later by hom aan. Sonder om eers vir sy strakgesig Auror te vra, beduie Harry dat Ron en Hermione hom met die perron langs moet volg sodat hulle ’n leë kompartement kan soek.

“Ons kan nie,” sê Hermione verskonend. “Ek en Ron moet eers na die prefekte se wa toe gaan en die gange vir ’n rukkie patrolleer.”

“O ja, ek het vergeet,” sê Harry.

“Julle beter dadelik inklim, almal van julle. Dis nog net ’n paar minute voor die trein ry,” sê mevrou Weasley en kyk op haar horlosie. “Nou ja, geniet die kwartaal, Ron ...”

“Meneer Weasley, kan ons gou praat?” vra Harry, wat op die ingewing van die oomblik tot ’n besluit gekom het.

“Natuurlik,” sê meneer Weasley. Hy lyk effens verbaas, maar volg Harry nogtans tot buite hoorafstand van die ander.

Harry het mooi daaroor gedink en tot die gevolgtrekking gekom dat as hy enigiemand gaan vertel, meneer Weasley die regte persoon sal wees; eerstens omdat hy by die Ministerie werk en daarom in die beste posisie is om verder ondersoek in te stel, en tweedens omdat die moontlikheid dat meneer Weasley van woede sal ontplof volgens hom baie skraal is.

Hy sien hoe kyk mevrou Weasley en die stroewe Auror hulle agterdogtig aan terwyl hulle wegbeweeg.

“Toe ons in Diagonaalstraat was —” begin Harry, maar meneer Weasley spring hom grinnikend voor.

“Gaan jy nou vir my sê waarheen jy, Ron en Hermione verdwyn het terwyl julle kastig in die agterste vertrek daar in Fred en George se winkel was?”

“Hoe het u — ?”

“Kom nou, Harry. Jy praat hier met die man wat Fred en George grootgemaak het.”

“E ... ja, reg ... Ons was nie in die agterste vertrek nie.”

“Nou goed, laat ons die ergste hoor.”

“Wel, ons het vir Draco Malfoy agtervolg. Ons het my Onsigbaarheidsmantel gebruik.”

“Was daar enige spesifieke rede voor, of was dit sommer net ’n impulsiewe besluit?”

“Ek het gedink Malfoy voer iets in die mou,” sê Harry en ignoreer meneer Weasley se uitdrukking wat ’n mengsel van ergernis en geamuseerdheid is. “Hy het sy ma afgeskud en ek wou weet hoekom.”

“Natuurlik wou jy,” sê meneer Weasley gelate. “En? Kon jy toe uitvind hoekom?”

“Hy’s by Borgin & Burkes in,” sê Harry “en hy’t die ou daar, Borgin, begin boelie en gesê hy moet hom help om iets reg te maak. En hy’t verder gesê Borgin moet iets anders vir hom hou. Dit het geklink of dit dieselfde soort ding is as dit wat reggemaak moet word. Asof die twee goed ’n paar is. En ...”

Harry haal diep asem.

“Daar’s nog iets. Ons het gesien hoe Malfoy omtrent deur die dak spring toe Madame Malkin aan sy linkerarm wou raak. Ek dink hy is met die Donker Merk gebrandmerk. Ek dink hy het sy pa as ’n Doodseter vervang.”

Meneer Weasley lyk uit die veld geslaan. Ná ’n oomblik sê hy: “Harry, ek twyfel of Jy-Weet-Wie ’n sestienjarige sal toelaat –”

“Weet enigiemand regtig wat Jy-Weet-Wie sal doen en wat nie?” vra Harry kwaad. “Ek’s jammer, maar is dit nie die moeite werd om dit te ondersoek nie? As Malfoy iets reggemaak wil hê en hy Borgin moet dreig om dit gedoen te kry, is dit tien teen een iets wat Donker of gevaarlik is, of hoe?”

“Om eerlik te wees, betwyfel ek dit, Harry,” sê meneer Weasley stadig. “Jy sien, toe Lucius Malfoy gearresteer is, het ons ’n klopjag op sy huis uitgevoer. Ons het alles wat gevaarlik kan wees daar weg-geneem.”

“Ek dink julle het iets mis gekyk,” sê Harry hardkoppig.

“Dis moontlik,” sê meneer Weasley, maar Harry kan sien meneer Weasley probeer hom net paai.

Daar is ’n harde fluit agter hulle; amper almal is nou al in die trein en die deure gaan toe.

“Jy beter gou maak,” sê meneer Weasley en mevrou Weasley gil: “Harry, maak gou!”

Hy beweeg vinnig vorentoe, en meneer en mevrou Weasley help hom om sy trommel in die trein te laai.

“Luister, skat, jy kom Kersfees na ons toe; dis alles klaar met Dumbledore gereël, so ons sien mekaar sommer gou weer,” sê mevrou Weasley deur die venster terwyl Harry die deur agter hom toemaak en die trein begin beweeg. “Kyk mooi na jouself en –”

Die trein begin spoed optel.

“– wees soet en –”

Sy moet draf om by te hou.

“– bly veilig!”

Harry waai tot die trein om ’n draai gaan en hy meneer en mevrou Weasley nie meer kan sien nie, dan draai hy om en kyk wat van die ander geword het. Hy onthou skielik dat Ron en Hermione in die prefekwa vasgekleuster is, maar Ginny sit net ’n entjie verder in die gang af met maats en gesels. Hy gaan na haar toe en sleep sy trommel agter hom aan.

Mense staar hom skaamteloos aan soos wat hy nader kom. Hulle druk hul gesigte selfs teen die kompartemente se vensters om hom beter te kan sien. Hy het verwag hy sal met meer nuuskierige agies te

doen kry ná al die gerugte in die *Daaglikse Profeet* dat hy die “Uitverkorene” is, maar hy hou nie daarvan om te voel hy staan stoksielalleen in ’n baie helder kollig nie. Hy tik Ginny op die skouer.

“Lus om saam met my ’n kompartement te soek?”

“Ek kan nie, Harry. Ek het Dean belowe ek ontmoet hom,” sê Ginny opgewonde. “Sien jou later.”

“Reg,” sê Harry. Hy voel ’n vreemde tikkie irritasie toe sy wegstap met haar lang rooi hare wat agter haar op en af wip. Hy het gedurende die vakansie al so gewoon geraak aan haar teenwoordigheid dat hy amper vergeet het dat Ginny nie op skool saam met hom, Ron en Hermione rondhang nie. Hy knip sy oë en kyk om: Hy is omring deur meisies wat hom gehipnotiseer aanstaar.

“Haai, Harry!” hoor hy ’n bekende stem agter hom.

“Neville!” sê Harry verlig en draai om na die seun met die ronde gesig wat sukkel om by hom uit te kom.

“Hallo, Harry,” sê ’n meisie net agter Neville. Sy het lang hare en groot, wasige oë.

“Luna, haai, hoe gaan dit?”

“Baie goed, dankie,” sê Luna. Sy hou ’n tydskrif voor haar bors vas; groot letters voorop kondig aan dat daar ’n gratis Gesigskringbril binne-in is.

“Gaan dit nog goed met *Die Vitter*?” vra Harry, wat nogal van die tydskrif hou en die vorige jaar ’n eksklusiewe onderhoud aan hulle toegestaan het.

“O ja, ons sirkulasie is baie op,” sê Luna tevrede.

“Kom ons kry sitplek,” stel Harry voor en die drie van hulle loop verder met die gang af, verby hordes studente wat hulle stil aangaap. Hulle kry uiteindelik ’n leë kompartement en Harry verdwyn dankbaar binnetoe.

“Hulle staar tot na ons ook,” sê Neville en wys na homself en Luna, “net oor ons by jou is!”

“Hulle kyk vir jou omdat jy ook by die Ministerie was,” sê Harry terwyl hy sy trommel op die bagasierak lig. “Die *Daaglikse Profeet* het ’n groot ding van ons avontuurtjie daar gemaak. Het jy dit nie gesien nie?”

“Ja, ek dog nog Ouma gaan kwaad wees oor al die publisiteit,” sê Neville, “maar sy was in haar skik. Sê ek begin uiteindelik in my pa se voetspore volg. Sy’t tot vir my ’n nuwe towerstaf gekoop, kyk!” Hy haal dit uit en wys vir Harry.

“Kersiehout en eenhoringhaar,” sê hy trots. “Ons dink dis die laaste een wat Ollivander ooit verkoop het. Hy’t net mooi die volgende dag verdwyn – Hei, kom terug, Trevor!”

Hy duik onder die sitplek in agter sy padda aan wat een van sy vele pogings aanwend om weg te kom.

“Gaan Dumbledore se Soldate vanjaar weer vergaderings hou, Harry?” vra Luna terwyl sy ’n psigedeliese bril uit die middel van *Die Vitter* haal.

“Dis nie meer nodig noudat ons van Umbridge ontslae is nie, is dit?” sê Harry en gaan sit. Neville stamp sy kop teen die sitplek toe hy daar onder uitkom. Hy lyk baie teleurgesteld.

“Ek het gehou van die DS! Ek het baie daaruit geleer!”

“Ek het die vergaderings ook geniet,” sê Luna rustig. “Dit het my laat voel ek het vriende.”

Dit is een van daardie ongemaklike dinge wat Luna dikwels sê en wat Harry laat ineenkrimp en hom tegelyk jammer en skaam laat voel. Maar voor hy kan antwoord, is daar ’n gedoente buite die kompartement se deur; ’n groep vierdejaarmeisies fluister en giggel saam aan die ander kant van die glas.

“Vra jy hom!”

“Nee, vra jy!”

“Ek sal!”

En een van hulle, ’n dapper meisie met groot, donker oë, ’n prominente ken en lang swart hare stoot die deur oop.

“Haai, Harry, ek’s Romilda, Romilda Vane,” sê sy hard en vol self-vertroue. “Hoekom kom jy nie na ons kompartement toe nie? Jy hoef nie by hulle te sit nie,” fluister sy hoorbaar en wys na Neville se agterwêreld wat weer onder die sitplek uitsteek terwyl hy Trevor soek en Luna, wat nou haar nuwe gratis Gesigskringbril dra en soos ’n getikte, veelkleurige uil lyk.

“Hulle is vriende van my,” sê Harry koel.

“O,” sê die meisie en lyk baie verbaas. “O, oukei.”

Sy gaan uit en stoot die deur agter haar toe.

“Mense dink jy sal *cooler* vriende as ons hê,” sê Luna so pynlik eerlik soos altyd.

“Julle is *cool*,” sê Harry saaklik. “Nie een van hulle was by die Ministerie nie. Hulle het nie saam met my baklei nie.”

“Dis baie *nice* van jou om dit te sê,” sê Luna en glimlag breed. Sy druk die Gesigskringbril hoër teen haar neus op en maak haar gemaklik om *Die Vitter* te lees.

“Maar ons het hom nie aangevat nie,” sê Neville terwyl hy met ’n kop vol donse en stof onder die sitplek uitsukkel met ’n gelate Trevor, in sy hand. “Jy het. Jy moet hoor hoe praat my ouma van jou. ‘*Daai Harry Potter het meer ruggraat as die hele kaboedel by die Ministerie van Towerkuns saam!*’ Sy sal enigiets gee om jou as haar kleinseun te hê ...”

Harry lag ongemaklik en verander die onderwerp so gou moontlik na hul UIL-uitslae. Terwyl Neville vir hom al sy simbole aframmel en hardop wonder of hy toegelaat sal word om Transfigurasie op OTT-vlak te doen as hy net 'n Aanvaarbaar daarvoor gekry het, hou Harry hom dop sonder om regtig te luister.

Voldemort het Neville se kindertyd net soveel soos Harry s'n verwoes, maar Neville het nie 'n benul van hoe amper Harry se lot syne was nie. Die profesie kon na enigteen van hulle twee verwys het, maar om sy eie onverklaarbare redes het Voldemort geglo dit verwys na Harry.

As Voldemort Neville gekies het, sou Neville nou oorkant Harry gesit het met die weerligletsel op sy voorkop en die las van die profesie op sy skouers ... Of sou hy? Sou Neville se ma bereid gewees het om te sterf om hom te red, soos wat Lily vir Harry gedoen het? Natuurlik sou sy ... Maar wat as sy dit nie kon regkry om tussen haar seun en Voldemort te staan nie? Sou daar dan glad nie 'n "Uitverkorene" gewees het nie? Sou die sitplek waarop Neville nou sit dan leeg gewees het? Sou Harry dan nie die letsel gehad het nie, en sou sy eie ma en nie Ron s'n nie, hom dan netnou op die stasie tot siens gesoen het?

"Is jy oukei, Harry? Jy lyk snaaks," sê Neville.

Harry ruk hom reg.

"Jammer – ek –"

"Het 'n Jigjors jou beetgekry?" vra Luna simpatiek en kyk deur haar enorme gekleurde bril na Harry.

"Ek – wat?"

"'n Jigjors ... Hulle's onsigbaar; hulle sweef by jou ore in en benewel jou brein," sê sy. "Ek dog ek voel een hier rondzoem."

Sy waai met haar hande in die lug asof sy groot, onsigbare motte verwilder. Harry en Neville vang mekaar se oog en begin dadelik oor Kwiddiek praat.

Die weer buite die treinvensters is so wisselvallig soos wat dit al heel somer is; hulle ry ente deur ysige mis en dan weer in flou, helder sonlig. Dit is tydens een van hierdie sonnige dele, toe die son amper reg bokant hulle sigbaar is, dat Ron en Hermione uiteindelik by die kompartement inkom.

"Wens die trollie wil nou met middagete verbykom. Ek's dood van die honger," sê Ron verlangend. Hy val op die sitplek langs Harry neer en vryf sy maag. "Haai, Neville; haai, Luna. Raai wat?" voeg hy by en draai na Harry. "Malfoy doen nie prefekdiens nie. Hy sit net in sy kompartement saam met die ander Slytherin-ouens. Ons het hom gesien toe ons daar verby is."

Harry sit regop, die ene belangstelling. Malfoy sal nie die kans

laat verbygaan om sy mag as prefek ten toon te stel nie; hy het dit laas jaar gans te gereeld misbruik.

“Wat het hy gedoen toe hy julle sien?”

“Die gewone,” sê Ron ongeërg en demonstreer ’n ongeskikte handgebaar. “Maar dis nie hoe hy gewoonlik is nie, is dit? Wel – dit is –” en hy maak weer die handgebaar, “maar hoekom is hy nie daarbuite besig om die eerstejaars te boelie nie?”

“Weet nie,” sê Harry, maar sy brein is in hoogste versnelling. Het Malfoy belangriker dinge om te doen as om die jonger studente te boelie?

“Miskien het hy die Inkwisisiepatrollie verkies,” sê Hermione. “Miskien voel dit nou vir hom te mak om ’n prefek te wees.”

“Ek dink nie so nie,” sê Harry. “Ek dink hy’s –”

Maar voor hy op sy teorie kan uitbrei, word die kompartement se deur weer oopgestoot en ’n derdejaarmeisie strompel hygend in.

“Ek moet dit aflewer – vir Neville Longbottom en Harry P. Potter.” Haar moed begewe haar toe sy in Harry se oë kyk en sy raak rooi in die gesig. Sy hou twee perkamentrolle wat met purper lint vasgebind is in haar hande vas. Harry en Neville neem elkeen die rol wat aan hom geadresseer is en die meisie retireer by die kompartement uit.

“Wat is dit?” wil Ron weet terwyl Harry syne ooprol.

“’n Uitnodiging,” sê Harry.

“Harry,

Ek sal bly wees as jy vir ’n happe middagete by my wil aansluit in kompartement C.

Vriendelike groete, Professor H.E.F. Slughorn”

“Wie’s professor Slughorn?” vra Neville, wat verslae na sy eie uitnodiging kyk.

“Nuwe onderwyser,” sê Harry. “Wel, ek veronderstel ons sal moet gaan, nè?”

“Maar wat wil hy van my hê?” vra Neville benoud asof hy detensie verwag.

“G’n idee nie,” sê Harry, wat nie heeltemal waar is nie, hoewel hy nog geen bewyse het dat sy vermoede reg is nie. “Luister,” voeg hy by, opgewonde oor die skielike blink ingewing, “kom ons gaan onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel, dan kan ons op pad kyk wat Malfoy aanvang.”

Maar dan besef hy sy plan sal nie werk nie; die gange is so gepak met mense wat na die trollie soek om middagete te koop dat dit on-

moontlik sal wees om met die mantel aan verby hulle te kom. Harry sit dit met spyt terug in sy sak terwyl hy dink hoe lekker dit sou gewees het om al die gestaar vry te spring, want daar is nou selfs nóg meer mense wat hom aangaap as toe hy vroeër met die gang af beweeg het. Elke nou en dan bars studente uit hul kompartemente om hom beter te kan sien. Almal behalwe Cho Chang, wat dadelik by haar kompartement ingaan toe sy Harry sien aankom. Terwyl Harry by haar venster verbyloop, sien hy sy is diep in gesprek met Marietta, wat 'n baie dik laag grimering dra, maar nog steeds nie die vreemde formasie puisies wat soos pokke oral op haar gesig sit, kan verdoesel nie. Harry grinnik effens en baan dan sy weg verder.

Toe hulle uiteindelik by kompartement C aankom, sien hulle dadelik hulle is nie Slughorn se enigste gaste nie, hoewel Slughorn se entoesiastiese verwelkoming dit duidelik maak dat Harry die gunsteling is.

“Harry, ou seun!” sê Slughorn en spring op sodat sy groot, fluweelbedekte maag al die oorblywende ruimte in die kompartement in beslag neem. Sy blink bleskop en groot silwer hangsnor skitter so helder soos die goue knope op sy onderbaadjie in die sonlig. “Goed om jou te sien, goed om jou te sien! En jy moet meneer Longbottom wees!”

Neville knik en lyk bang. Slughorn beduie hulle na die enigste twee oorblywende sitplekke, naaste aan die deur en oorkant mekaar. Harry bekyk die ander gaste. Hy herken 'n Slytherin uit sy jaar, 'n lang, swart seun met hoë wangbene en lang, skuins oë; daar is ook twee sewendejaarseuns wat Harry nie ken nie en, vasgedruk in die hoek langs Slughorn met 'n uitdrukking wat sê sy is nie heeltemal seker hoe sy daar beland het nie, sit Ginny.

“Ken julle almal?” vra Slughorn vir Harry en Neville. “Blaise Zabini is natuurlik in julle jaar –”

Zabini toon nie enige teken dat hy hulle herken of wil groet nie, en Harry en Neville ook nie: Gryffindor en Slytherin se studente verafsku mekaar uit beginsel.

“Dit is Cormac McLaggen. Miskien het julle mekaar al raakge-loop – ? Nog nie?”

McLaggen, 'n groot seun met steekhare, lig sy hand op en Harry en Neville knik vir hom.

“– en dit is Marcus Belby; ek weet nie of – ?”

Die maer en senuweeagtige Belby glimlag geforseerd.

“– en hierdie sjarmante jong dame sê vir my sy ken julle!” sluit Slughorn af.

Ginny trek vir Harry en Neville skewebek agter Slughorn se rug.

“Nou toe nou, dis nou waarlik aangenaam,” sê Slughorn gemoe-
delik. “’n Kans om julle almal so ’n bietjie beter te leer ken. Hier, kry
gerus ’n servet. Ek pak altyd my eie middagete in. As ek reg onthou,
verkoop die trollie meestal net Droptowerstaffies, en ’n ou man se
spysverteringstelsel is nie meer teen sulke dinge opgewasse nie ...
Fisant, Belby?”

Belby skrik en aanvaar die homp koue vleis wat soos ’n halwe
fisant lyk.

“Ek vertel nou net vir jong Marcus hier dat ek die genoeë gehad
het om sy oom Damocles te onderrig,” sê Slughorn vir Harry en
Neville terwyl hy vir almal broodrolletjies uit ’n mandjie aanbied.
“Uitsonderlike towenaar, uitsonderlik. Hy het sy Orde van Merlin
ongetwyfeld verdien. Sien jy jou oom dikwels, Marcus?” Ongelukkig
het Belby so pas ’n groot hap fisant gevat; in sy haas om Slughorn te
antwoord, sluk hy te vinnig, word pers in die gesig en begin verstik.

“Anapneo,” sê Slughorn doodluiters en wys met sy towerstaf na
Belby. Die seun se lugweë gaan dadelik weer oop.

“Nie ... nie te dikwels nie, nee,” snak Belby terwyl die trane uit
sy oë loop.

“Wel, dis te verstane. Hy’s natuurlik besig,” sê Slughorn en kyk
Belby vraend aan. “Hy moet baie hard gewerk het om die Wolfs-
wortel-towerdrankie te ontwikkel.”

“Ja, seker ...” sê Belby en lyk bang om nog ’n hap fisant te vat
voor hy seker is Slughorn is klaar met hom. “E ... hy en my pa kom
nie baie goed klaar nie, sien, so ek weet nie eintlik veel van ...”

Sy stem sterf weg; Slughorn glimlag koud vir hom en draai lie-
wer na McLaggen toe.

“En jy, Cormac,” sê Slughorn, “ek weet toevallig jy sien jou oom
Tiberius gereeld, want hy het ’n kostelike foto van julle twee wat
Nogsterte jag, in Norfolk as ek reg onthou?”

“O ja, dit was baie lekker,” sê McLaggen. “Ons het saam met
Bertie Higgs en Rufus Scrimgeour gegaan – dis natuurlik voor hy
Minister geword het –”

“Aa, so jy ken Bertie en Rufus ook?” vra Slughorn stralend. Hy
bied vir sy gaste pasteitjies op ’n skinkbord aan en slaan Belby om
die een of ander rede oor. “Nou sê vir my ...”

Dit is nes Harry verwag het. Almal hier is klaarblyklik genooi
omdat hulle verwant is aan iemand wat beroemd of invloedryk is –
almal behalwe Ginny. Zabini word ná McLaggen ondervra en dit
blyk dat sy ma ’n legendariese mooi heks is (volgens wat Harry kan
uitmaak, was sy sewe keer getroud, en elkeen van haar mans is op
’n geheimsinnige manier dood en het vir haar hope goud nagelaat).

Volgende is dit Neville se beurt: Dit is 'n baie ongemaklike tien minute, want Neville se ouers, bekende Aurors, is deur Bellatrix Lestrange en 'n paar van haar Doodsetermakkers gemartel totdat hulle waansinnig geword het. Aan die einde van Neville se onderhoud kry Harry die indruk Slughorn het besluit om eers te wag en kyk of Neville net soveel aanleg soos sy ouers het.

“En nou,” sê Slughorn en skuif sy massiewe lyf in sy sitplek reg soos 'n seremoniemeester wat sy ster-item gaan aankondig. “Harry Potter! Waar sal ons begin? Ek voel ek het skaars die oppervlak ontgin toe ons mekaar dié somer ontmoet het!” Hy betrag Harry vir 'n oomblik asof hy 'n uitsonderlike groot en sappige stuk fisantvleis is en sê dan: “Hulle noem jou nou die ‘Uitverkorene’!”

Harry sê niks. Belby, McLaggen en Zabini staar hom almal aan.

“Natuurlik,” sê Slughorn, terwyl hy Harry fyn dophou, “is daar al jare lank gerugte ... Ek onthou nog goed toe – wel – ná daardie aaklige nag – Lily – James – ná jy oorleef het – was daar gerugte dat jy oor buitengewone magte moet beskik –”

Zabini gee geamuseerd 'n skeptiese hoesie. Skielik kom daar 'n bulderende stem agter Slughorn uit.

“Ja, Zabini, jy dink mos net jy is spesiaal ... om jou voor te doen ...”

“Allamapstieks!” kloek Slughorn gemaklik en kyk na Ginny wat Zabini van agter Slughorn se groot maag aangluur. “Jy moet lig loop, Blaise! Ek het hierdie jong dame die wonderbaarlikste Vlermuis-verwilderpaljas sien uitvoer toe ek verby haar kompartement geloop het! Ek sal haar nie die harnas wil injaag nie!”

Zabini gee Ginny nogtans 'n minagtende kyk.

“Nietemin,” sê Slughorn en draai terug na Harry. “Daar was hierdie somer soveel gerugte. Mens weet natuurlik nie wat om te glo nie; die *Profeet* het al voorheen onjuisthede geplaas en foute begaan – maar daar bestaan weinig twyfel, gegewe die aantal ooggetuies, dat daar 'n *taamlike* insident by die Ministerie was en dat jy in die middel van alles was!” Harry weet nie hoe om hieruit te kom sonder om prontuit te jok nie en knik dus maar net en sê niks. Slughorn kyk hom tevrede aan.

“So beskeie, so beskeie; g'n wonder Dumbledore is so erg – jy was dus daar? Maar die res van die stories – so sensasioneel, natuurlik, dat 'n mens nie juis weet wat om te glo nie – die befaamde profesie, byvoorbeeld –”

“Ons het nooit 'n profesie gehoor nie,” sê Neville en word malvapienk.

“Dis reg,” beaam Ginny. “Ek en Neville was al twee ook daar, en hierdie ‘Uitverkorene’ nonsens is maar net weer een van die goed wat die *Profeet* soos gewoonlik opmaak.”

“Julle was albei ook daar?” sê Slughorn met groot belangstelling. Hy kyk van Ginny na Neville, maar hulle kyk hom bot aan, al glimlag hy ook hoe bemoedigend. “Ja ...wel ... Dis natuurlik waar dat die *Profeet* soms oordryf ...” gaan Slughorn half teleurgesteld voort. “Ek onthou liewe Gwenog het my vertel – Gwenog Jones, weet julle, Kaptein van die Holyhead Harpies –”

Hy dwaal af in ’n omslagtige relaas van herinneringe, maar Harry kry die idee Slughorn is nog nie klaar met hom nie en dat Neville en Ginny hom nie oortuig het nie.

Die middag sleep voort met nóg staaltjies oor beroemde towenaars vir wie Slughorn skoolgehou het en wat volgens hom almal in hul noppies was om aan te sluit by wat hy Hogwarts se Slakkeklub noem. Harry kan nie wag om te loop nie, maar hy weet nie hoe om dit op ’n beleefde manier te doen nie. Uiteindelik stoom die trein deur nog ’n lang mistige strook tot in ’n rooi sonsondergang en Slughorn kom agter dit is skemer.

“Goeie genade, dit word al donker! Ek het nie agtergekom hulle steek die lampe aan nie! Julle beter julle togas gaan aantrek, almal van julle. McLaggen, jy moet kom inloer en daai boek oor Nogsterte by my leen. Harry, Blaise – enige tyd wat julle in die omtrek is. En dieselfde geld jou, juffie,” sê hy en knipoog vir Ginny. “Nou toe, weg is julle, weg is julle!”

Toe hy verby Harry druk in die gang wat al donkerder word, gee Zabini vir hom ’n vuil kyk wat Harry met rente teruggee. Hy, Ginny en Neville volg Zabini al met die gang af.

“Dankie tog dis verby,” mompel Neville. “Snaakse man daai, nè?”

“Ja, nogal,” sê Harry met sy oë op Zabini. “Hoe’t jy daar binne beland, Ginny?”

“Hy’t gesien hoe toor ek vir Zacharias Smith,” sê Ginny. “Onthou jy daai idioot van Hoesenproes wat in die DS was? Hy’t aanhou en aanhou uitvra oor wat in die Ministerie gebeur het en toe was ek later so vies dat ek hom getoor het. Toe Slughorn daar inkom, dog ek ek gaan detensie kry, maar hy’t gedink dit was ’n goeie paljas en my vir middagete genooi. Mal, nè?”

“Dis ’n beter rede om iemand oor te nooi as die feit dat sy ma beroemd is,” sê Harry terwyl hy suur in Zabini se agterkop vaskyk, “of dat sy oom –”

Maar hy bly skielik stil. Hy het nou net ’n idee gekry; ’n roekelose maar potensieel wonderlike idee ... Zabini sal binnekort by Slytherin se sesdejaars se kompartement ingaan en Malfoy sit daar en dink niemand behalwe sy mede-Slytherins kan hom hoor nie ... Sê nou Harry kan ongesiens saam met Zabini inglip? Wat sal hy nie

alles sien of hoor nie? Daar is weliswaar nie meer veel van die reis oor nie – hulle sal seker oor minder as 'n halfuur by Hogsmeade se stasie wees te oordeel na die wilde natuurtonele wat by die vensters verbyflits – maar niemand anders is bereid om Harry se vermoedens ernstig op te neem nie, so hy sal self moet bewys hy is reg.

“Sien julle twee later,” sê Harry gedemp. Hy haal sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel uit en gooi dit oor hom.

“Maar wat gaan jy – ?”

“Later!” fluister Harry en volg Zabini so saggies moontlik, al rammel die trein só dat dit eintlik onnodig is om versigtig te wees.

Die gange is nou amper heeltemal leeg. Omtrent almal is terug na hul kompartemente om hul skoolklere aan te trek en hul besittings in te pak. Al is hy so naby moontlik aan Zabini sonder om aan hom te raak, kan Harry nie vinnig genoeg by die kompartement inkom toe Zabini die deur oopmaak nie. Zabini trek die deur alreeds toe en Harry moet met sy voet keer dat hy dit toemaak.

“Wat makeer hierdie ding?” sê Zabini vies terwyl hy die deur herhaaldelik teen Harry se voet vaskap.

Harry gryp die deur en druk dit hard oop. Zabini, wat nog aan die handvatse vashou, val op Gregory Goyle se skoot en tydens die gepaardgaande deurmekaarspul glip Harry by die kompartement in, spring tot op Zabini se tydelik onbesette plek en trek homself op na die bagasierak. Gelukkig knor Goyle en Zabini vir mekaar en is almal se oë op hulle gevestig, want Harry is seker sy voete en enkels het onder die mantel uitgesteek toe hy homself ophys. Vir een aaklige oomblik dink hy hy sien hoe volg Malfoy se oë sy tekkies soos wat hy sy bene optrek, maar toe klap Goyle die deur toe en smyt Zabini van hom af. Zabini sak op sy eie sitplek neer en lyk suur, Vincent Crabbe begin weer sy strokiesboek lees en Malfoy lê smalend terug oor twee sitplekke met sy kop op Pansy Parkinson se skoot. Harry lê ongemaklik onder die mantel opgekrul om seker te maak daar steek niks van hom uit nie. Hy kyk hoe Pansy Malfoy se blink, blonde hare van sy voorkop af wegvee terwyl sy glimlag asof enigiemand wat sou gee om nou in haar skoene te staan. Die lanterns wat aan die wa se plafon hang, baai die kompartement in helder lig: Harry kan elke woord in Crabbe se strokiesboek reg onder hom lees.

“So, Zabini,” sê Malfoy, “wat wou Slughorn toe hê?”

“Hy probeer maar net inkruip by mense met goeie konneksies,” sê Zabini, wat Goyle nog steeds aangeluur. “Nie dat hy veel gekry het nie.”

Malfoy lyk ontevrede met hierdie inligting.

“Wie anders het hy genooi?” wil hy weet.

“McLaggen van Gryffindor,” sê Zabini.

“O ja, sy oom is hoog op in die Ministerie,” sê Malfoy.

“– iemand anders met die naam Belby, van Raweklou.

“Daai simpel bobbejaan?” sê Pansy.

“– en Longbottom, Potter en daai Weasley-meisie,” maak Zabini klaar.

Malfoy klap Pansy se hand weg en kom vinnig regop.

“Hy het *Longbottom* genooi?”

“Wel, ek neem so aan, want Longbottom was daar,” sê Zabini ongeërg.

“Wat het Longbottom waarin Slughorn sal belangstel?”

Zabini haal sy skouers op.

“Potter, alewig Potter; hy wou natuurlik sien hoe lyk die *Uitverkorene*,” sê Malfoy smalend, “maar daai Weasley-meisiekind! Wat is so spesiaal aan *haar*?”

“Baie van die ouens hou van haar,” sê Pansy en loer uit die hoek van haar oog om te sien hoe Malfoy reageer. “Selfs jy dink sy’s iets vir die oog, nè, Blaise? En ons weet almal hoe uitsoekiger jy!”

“Ek sal nie aan ’n vieslike klein bloedverraaier soos sy raak nie, al lyk sy ook hoe,” sê Zabini kil en Pansy lyk tevrede. Malfoy sak weer terug tot op haar skoot sodat sy sy hare verder kan streel.

“Wel, ek dink Slughorn het vrot smaak. Miskien raak hy bietjie seniel. Foeitog, my pa het altyd gesê hy was op sy dag ’n goeie toewenaar. My pa was nogal een van sy gunsteling. Slughorn het seker nie gehoor ek is op die trein nie of –”

“Ek sou nie op ’n uitnodiging reken nie,” sê Zabini. “Hy’t my oor Nott se pa uitgevra toe ek daar aankom. Hulle was glo ou vriende, maar toe hy hoor hy is by die Ministerie gevang, het hy nie gelukkig gelyk nie, en Nott het nie ’n uitnodiging gekry nie, het hy? Ek dink nie Slughorn stel in Doodseters belang nie.”

Malfoy lyk kwaad, en gee ’n besonder humorlose, gemaakte laggie.

“Wel, wie gee om waarin hy belangstel? Wat is hy in elk geval nou eintlik? Net ’n simpel onderwyser.” Malfoy gaap windmakerig. “Ek bedoel, ek is dalk nie eers meer volgende jaar in Hogwarts nie, so wat traak dit my of ’n vet ou *has-been* van my hou of nie?”

“Wat bedoel jy, jy’s dalk nie meer volgende jaar in Hogwarts nie?” vra Pansy verontwaardig en hou dadelik op om sy hare te streel.

“Wel, jy weet nooit,” sê Malfoy met ’n sweem van ’n grynsag. “Ek sal dalk – e – na groter en beter dinge aanbeweeg.”

Harry se hart begin vinnig klop waar hy in die bagasierak onder sy mantel lê. Wat sal Ron en Hermione hiervan sê? Crabbe en Goyle gaap Malfoy aan; hulle het klaarblyklik geen benul van die feit dat Malfoy beplan om na groter en beter dinge aan te beweeg nie. Selfs Zabini se hooghartige uitdrukking word deur 'n tikkie nuuskierigheid ontsier. Pansy lyk dronkgeslaan en begin Malfoy se hare weer stadig streel.

“Jy bedoel – Hy?”

Malfoy haal sy skouers op.

“Moeder wil hê ek moet klaarmaak met skool, maar ek dink nie dis deesdae meer belangrik nie. Ek bedoel, dink net ... Wie gaan hulle nou steur aan hoeveel UILE en OTTe iemand het wanneer die Donker Heer oorneem? Definitief nie hy nie ... Dit sal alles gaan oor wat jy bereid is om vir hom te doen en hoe toegewyd jy aan hom is.”

“En jy dink jy sal iets vir hom kan doen?” vra Zabini minagtend. “Sestien jaar oud en nog nie eens ten volle gekwalifiseer nie?”

“Ek het mos nou net gesê – miskien gee hy nie om of ek gekwalifiseer is nie. Miskien het ek nie kwalifikasies nodig vir die taak wat ek vir hom moet verrig nie,” sê Malfoy sag.

Crabbe en Goyle se monde hang al twee oop soos drakekop-spuiers; Pansy staar af na Malfoy asof sy nog nooit enigiets so ont-sagwekkend gesien het nie.

“Daar's Hogwarts,” sê Malfoy, wat die uitwerking wat hy op hulle het duidelik geniet, en wys na die donker venster. “Ons beter ons togas aantrek.”

Harry staar Malfoy so stip aan dat hy nie agterkom dat Goyle opstaan om sy trommel te kry nie. Toe hy dit afpluk, kap die trommel Harry hard teen die kant van sy kop. Hy snak onwillekeurig van pyn en Malfoy kyk fronsend op na die bagasierak.

Harry is nie bang vir Malfoy nie, maar hy is nie lus dat 'n spul vyandige Slytherins hom onder sy Onsigbaarheismantel moet ontdek nie. Met oë wat water en 'n kop wat nog klop van pyn, haal hy sy towerstaf versigtig uit sodat hy die mantel nie deurmekaar maak nie en wag met ingehoue asem. Tot sy verligting lyk dit of Malfoy besluit het hy het hom verbeel hy het iets gehoor; hy trek sy toga net soos die ander aan, sluit sy trommel en wanneer die trein rukkerig begin stadiger ry, knoop hy 'n dik nuwe reismantel om sy nek vas.

Harry sien hoe die gange weer vol word en hoop Hermione en Ron sal sy goed vir hom op die perron aflaai; hy sal hier moet bly tot die kompartement heeltemal leeg is. Uiteindelik kom die trein

met 'n laaste ruk tot stilstand. Goyle stoot die deur oop en stamp vir hom 'n pad tussen 'n klomp tweedejaars oop; Crabbe en Zabini volg hom.

“Gaan jy solank,” sê Malfoy vir Pansy, wat vir hom wag, haar hand uitgestrek asof sy hoop hy gaan dit vat, “ek wil net gou iets kyk.”

Pansy gaan uit. Harry en Malfoy is nou alleen in die kompartement. Mense beweeg verby en klim op die donker perron af. Malfoy beweeg oor na die kompartement se deur en laat sak die blindings sodat niemand uit die gang kan inkyk nie. Dan buk hy oor sy trommel en maak dit weer oop.

Harry loer oor die rand van die bagasierak en sy hart pomp 'n bietjie vinniger. Wat steek Malfoy vir Pansy weg? Gaan hy nou die geheimsinnige gebreekte voorwerp sien wat so dringend reggemaak moet word?

“Petrificus Totalus!”

Sonder waarskuwing rig Malfoy sy towerstaf op Harry, wat oombliklik verlam is. Asof in stadige spoed tuimel hy uit die bagasierak en val met 'n pynlike slag wat die vloer laat skud voor Malfoy se voete neer. Die Onsigbaarheidsmantel is onder hom vasgevang en sy hele lyf lê blootgestel met sy bene nog steeds absurd in 'n knielposisie opgetrek. Hy kan nie 'n spier verroer nie; hy kan net opkyk na Malfoy wat breed glimlag.

“Ek dog so,” sê hy ingenome. “Ek het gehoor hoe Goyle se trommel jou tref. En ek dog ek sien iets wits deur die lug flits ná Zabini teruggekom het ...” Sy oë rus vir 'n oomblik op Harry se tekkies. “Dit was natuurlik jy wat die deur oopgehou het toe Zabini hom wou toemaak, of hoe?”

Hy kyk Harry stip aan.

“Jy’t niks gehoor wat ek wil wegsteek nie, Potter. Maar terwyl ek jou nou so hier het ...”

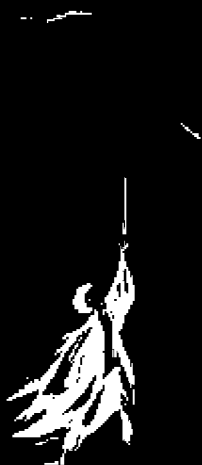
Hy trap hard op Harry se gesig. Harry voel sy neus breek; die bloed spat oral. “Dis van my pa. Nou laat ons sien ...”

Malfoy trek die mantel onder Harry se versteende liggaam uit en gooi dit oor hom.

“Ek dink nie hulle gaan jou kry voor die trein terug in Londen is nie,” sê hy sag. “Sien jou weer, Potter, ... of nie.”

Malfoy maak seker hy trap op Harry se vingers toe hy by die kompartement uitgaan.

CHAPTER EIGHT



SNAPE VICTORIOUS

Harry could not move a muscle. He lay there beneath the Invisibility Cloak feeling the blood from his nose flow, hot and wet, over his face, listening to the voices and footsteps in the corridor beyond. His immediate thought was that someone, surely, would check the compartments before the train departed again. But at once came the dispiriting realization that even if somebody looked into the compartment, he would be neither seen nor heard. His best hope was that somebody else would walk in and step on him.

Harry had never hated Malfoy more than as he lay there, like an absurd turtle on its back, blood dripping sickeningly into his open mouth. What a stupid situation to have landed himself in . . . and now

the last few footsteps were dying away; everyone was shuffling along the dark platform outside; he could hear the scraping of trunks and the loud babble of talk.

Ron and Hermione would think that he had left the train without them. Once they arrived at Hogwarts and took their places in the Great Hall, looked up and down the Gryffindor table a few times, and finally realized that he was not there, he, no doubt, would be halfway back to London.

He tried to make a sound, even a grunt, but it was impossible. Then he remembered that some wizards, like Dumbledore, could perform spells without speaking, so he tried to summon his wand, which had fallen out of his hand, by saying the words "*Accio Wand!*" over and over again in his head, but nothing happened.

He thought he could hear the rustling of the trees that surrounded the lake, and the far-off hoot of an owl, but no hint of a search being made or even (he despised himself slightly for hoping it) panicked voices wondering where Harry Potter had gone. A feeling of hopelessness spread through him as he imagined the convoy of thestral-drawn carriages trundling up to the school and the muffled yells of laughter issuing from whichever carriage Malfoy was riding in, where he could be recounting his attack on Harry to Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, and Pansy Parkinson.

The train lurched, causing Harry to roll over onto his side. Now he was staring at the dusty underside of the seats instead of the ceiling. The floor began to vibrate as the engine roared into life. The Express was leaving and nobody knew he was still on it. . . .

Then he felt his Invisibility Cloak fly off him and a voice overhead

said, "Wotcher, Harry."

There was a flash of red light and Harry's body unfroze; he was able to push himself into a more dignified sitting position, hastily wipe the blood off his bruised face with the back of his hand, and raise his head to look up at Tonks, who was holding the Invisibility Cloak she had just pulled away.

"We'd better get out of here, quickly," she said, as the train windows became obscured with steam and they began to move out of the station. "Come on, we'll jump."

Harry hurried after her into the corridor. She pulled open the train door and leapt onto the platform, which seemed to be sliding underneath them as the train gathered momentum. He followed her, staggered a little on landing, then straightened up in time to see the gleaming scarlet steam engine pick up speed, round the corner, and disappear from view.

The cold night air was soothing on his throbbing nose. Tonks was looking at him; he felt angry and embarrassed that he had been discovered in such a ridiculous position. Silently she handed him back the Invisibility Cloak.

"Who did it?"

"Draco Malfoy," said Harry bitterly. "Thanks for . . . well . . ."

"No problem," said Tonks, without smiling. From what Harry could see in the darkness, she was as mousy-haired and miserable-looking as she had been when he had met her at the Burrow. "I can fix your nose if you stand still."

Harry did not think much of this idea; he had been intending to visit Madam Pomfrey, the matron, in whom he had a little more confidence

when it came to Healing Spells, but it seemed rude to say this, so he stayed stock-still and closed his eyes.

“Episkey,” said Tonks.

Harry’s nose felt very hot, and then very cold. He raised a hand and felt it gingerly. It seemed to be mended.

“Thanks a lot!”

“You’d better put that Cloak back on, and we can walk up to the school,” said Tonks, still unsmiling. As Harry swung the Cloak back over himself, she waved her wand; an immense silvery four-legged creature erupted from it and streaked off into the darkness.

“Was that a Patronus?” asked Harry, who had seen Dumbledore send messages like this.

“Yes, I’m sending word to the castle that I’ve got you or they’ll worry. Come on, we’d better not dawdle.”

They set off toward the lane that led to the school.

“How did you find me?”

“I noticed you hadn’t left the train and I knew you had that Cloak. I thought you might be hiding for some reason. When I saw the blinds were drawn down on that compartment I thought I’d check.”

“But what are you doing here, anyway?” Harry asked.

“I’m stationed in Hogsmeade now, to give the school extra protection,” said Tonks.

“Is it just you who’s stationed up here, or — ?”

“No, Proudfoot, Savage, and Dawlish are here too.”

“Dawlish, that Auror Dumbledore attacked last year?”

“That’s right.”

They trudged up the dark, deserted lane, following the freshly made carriage tracks. Harry looked sideways at Tonks under his Cloak. Last year she had been inquisitive (to the point of being a little annoying at times), she had laughed easily, she had made jokes. Now she seemed older and much more serious and purposeful. Was this all the effect of what had happened at the Ministry? He reflected uncomfortably that Hermione would have suggested he say something consoling about Sirius to her, that it hadn't been her fault at all, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He was far from blaming her for Sirius's death; it was no more her fault than anyone else's (and much less than his), but he did not like talking about Sirius if he could avoid it. And so they tramped on through the cold night in silence, Tonks's long cloak whispering on the ground behind them.

Having always traveled there by carriage, Harry had never before appreciated just how far Hogwarts was from Hogsmeade Station. With great relief he finally saw the tall pillars on either side of the gates, each topped with a winged boar. He was cold, he was hungry, and he was quite keen to leave this new, gloomy Tonks behind. But when he put out a hand to push open the gates, he found them chained shut.

"Alohomora!" he said confidently, pointing his wand at the padlock, but nothing happened.

"That won't work on these," said Tonks. "Dumbledore bewitched them himself."

Harry looked around.

"I could climb a wall," he suggested.

"No, you couldn't," said Tonks flatly. "Anti-intruder jinxes on all

of them. Security's been tightened a hundredfold this summer."

"Well then," said Harry, starting to feel annoyed at her lack of helpfulness, "I suppose I'll just have to sleep out here and wait for morning."

"Someone's coming down for you," said Tonks. "Look."

A lantern was bobbing at the distant foot of the castle. Harry was so pleased to see it he felt he could even endure Filch's wheezy criticisms of his tardiness and rants about how his timekeeping would improve with the regular application of thumbscrews. It was not until the glowing yellow light was ten feet away from them, and Harry had pulled off his Invisibility Cloak so that he could be seen, that he recognized, with a rush of pure loathing, the uplit hooked nose and long, black, greasy hair of Severus Snape.

"Well, well, well," sneered Snape, taking out his wand and tapping the padlock once, so that the chains snaked backward and the gates creaked open. "Nice of you to turn up, Potter, although you have evidently decided that the wearing of school robes would detract from your appearance."

"I couldn't change, I didn't have my —" Harry began, but Snape cut across him.

"There is no need to wait, Nymphadora, Potter is quite — ah — safe in my hands."

"I meant Hagrid to get the message," said Tonks, frowning.

"Hagrid was late for the start-of-term feast, just like Potter here, so I took it instead. And incidentally," said Snape, standing back to allow Harry to pass him, "I was interested to see your new Patronus."

He shut the gates in her face with a loud clang and tapped the chains with his wand again, so that they slithered, clinking, back into place.

“I think you were better off with the old one,” said Snape, the malice in his voice unmistakable. “The new one looks weak.”

As Snape swung the lantern about, Harry saw, fleetingly, a look of shock and anger on Tonks’s face. Then she was covered in darkness once more.

“Good night,” Harry called to her over his shoulder, as he began the walk up to the school with Snape. “Thanks for . . . everything.”

“See you, Harry.”

Snape did not speak for a minute or so. Harry felt as though his body was generating waves of hatred so powerful that it seemed incredible that Snape could not feel them burning him. He had loathed Snape from their first encounter, but Snape had placed himself forever and irrevocably beyond the possibility of Harry’s forgiveness by his attitude toward Sirius. Whatever Dumbledore said, Harry had had time to think over the summer, and had concluded that Snape’s snide remarks to Sirius about remaining safely hidden while the rest of the Order of the Phoenix were off fighting Voldemort had probably been a powerful factor in Sirius rushing off to the Ministry the night that he had died. Harry clung to this notion, because it enabled him to blame Snape, which felt satisfying, and also because he knew that if anyone was not sorry that Sirius was dead, it was the man now striding next to him in the darkness.

“Fifty points from Gryffindor for lateness, I think,” said Snape. “And, let me see, another twenty for your Muggle attire. You know, I

don't believe any House has ever been in negative figures this early in the term. We haven't even started pudding. You might have set a record, Potter."

The fury and hatred bubbling inside Harry seemed to blaze white-hot, but he would rather have been immobilized all the way back to London than tell Snape why he was late.

"I suppose you wanted to make an entrance, did you?" Snape continued. "And with no flying car available you decided that bursting into the Great Hall halfway through the feast ought to create a dramatic effect."

Still Harry remained silent, though he thought his chest might explode. He knew that Snape had come to fetch him for this, for the few minutes when he could needle and torment Harry without anyone else listening.

They reached the castle steps at last and as the great oaken front doors swung open into the vast flagged entrance hall, a burst of talk and laughter and of tinkling plates and glasses greeted them through the doors standing open into the Great Hall. Harry wondered whether he could slip his Invisibility Cloak back on, thereby gaining his seat at the long Gryffindor table (which, inconveniently, was the farthest from the entrance hall) without being noticed. As though he had read Harry's mind, however, Snape said, "No Cloak. You can walk in so that everyone sees you, which is what you wanted, I'm sure."

Harry turned on the spot and marched straight through the open doors: anything to get away from Snape. The Great Hall, with its four long House tables and its staff table set at the top of the room, was decorated as usual with floating candles that made the plates below

glitter and glow. It was all a shimmering blur to Harry, however, who walked so fast that he was passing the Hufflepuff table before people really started to stare, and by the time they were standing up to get a good look at him, he had spotted Ron and Hermione, sped along the benches toward them, and forced his way in between them.

“Where’ve you — blimey, what’ve you done to your face?” said Ron, goggling at him along with everyone else in the vicinity.

“Why, what’s wrong with it?” said Harry, grabbing a spoon and squinting at his distorted reflection.

“You’re covered in blood!” said Hermione. “Come here —”

She raised her wand, said “*Tergeo!*” and siphoned off the dried blood.

“Thanks,” said Harry, feeling his now clean face. “How’s my nose looking?”

“Normal,” said Hermione anxiously. “Why shouldn’t it? Harry, what happened? We’ve been terrified!”

“I’ll tell you later,” said Harry curtly. He was very conscious that Ginny, Neville, Dean, and Seamus were listening in; even Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, had come floating along the bench to eavesdrop.

“But —” said Hermione.

“Not now, Hermione,” said Harry, in a darkly significant voice. He hoped very much that they would all assume he had been involved in something heroic, preferably involving a couple of Death Eaters and a dementor. Of course, Malfoy would spread the story as far and wide as he could, but there was always a chance it wouldn’t reach too many Gryffindor ears.

He reached across Ron for a couple of chicken legs and a handful of chips, but before he could take them they vanished, to be replaced with puddings.

“You missed the Sorting, anyway,” said Hermione, as Ron dived for a large chocolate gateau.

“Had say anything interesting?” asked Harry, taking a piece of treacle tart.

“More of the same, really . . . advising us all to unite in the face of our enemies, you know.”

“Dumbledore mentioned Voldemort at all?”

“Not yet, but he always saves his proper speech for after the feast, doesn’t he? It can’t be long now.”

“Snape said Hagrid was late for the feast —”

“You’ve seen Snape? How come?” said Ron between frenzied mouthfuls of gateau.

“Bumped into him,” said Harry evasively.

“Hagrid was only a few minutes late,” said Hermione. “Look, he’s waving at you, Harry.”

Harry looked up at the staff table and grinned at Hagrid, who was indeed waving at him. Hagrid had never quite managed to comport himself with the dignity of Professor McGonagall, Head of Gryffindor House, the top of whose head came up to somewhere between Hagrid’s elbow and shoulder as they were sitting side by side, and who was looking disapprovingly at this enthusiastic greeting. Harry was surprised to see the Divination teacher, Professor Trelawney, sitting on Hagrid’s other side; she rarely left her tower room, and he had never seen her at the start-of-term feast

before. She looked as odd as ever, glittering with beads and trailing shawls, her eyes magnified to enormous size by her spectacles. Having always considered her a bit of a fraud, Harry had been shocked to discover at the end of the previous term that it had been she who had made the prediction that caused Lord Voldemort to kill Harry's parents and attack Harry himself. The knowledge had made him even less eager to find himself in her company, but thankfully, this year he would be dropping Divination. Her great beaconlike eyes swiveled in his direction; he hastily looked away toward the Slytherin table. Draco Malfoy was miming the shattering of a nose to raucous laughter and applause. Harry dropped his gaze to his treacle tart, his insides burning again. What he would not give to fight Malfoy one-on-one . . .

"So what did Professor Slughorn want?" Hermione asked.

"To know what really happened at the Ministry," said Harry.

"Him and everyone else here," sniffed Hermione. "People were interrogating us about it on the train, weren't they, Ron?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "All wanting to know if you really are 'the Chosen One' —"

"There has been much talk on that very subject even amongst the ghosts," interrupted Nearly Headless Nick, inclining his barely connected head toward Harry so that it wobbled dangerously on its ruff. "I am considered something of a Potter authority; it is widely known that we are friendly. I have assured the spirit community that I will not pester you for information, however. 'Harry Potter knows that he can confide in me with complete confidence,' I told them. 'I would rather die than betray his trust.'"

“That’s not saying much, seeing as you’re already dead,” Ron observed.

“Once again, you show all the sensitivity of a blunt axe,” said Nearly Headless Nick in affronted tones, and he rose into the air and glided back toward the far end of the Gryffindor table just as Dumbledore got to his feet at the staff table. The talk and laughter echoing around the Hall died away almost instantly.

“The very best of evenings to you!” he said, smiling broadly, his arms opened wide as though to embrace the whole room.

“What happened to his hand?” gasped Hermione.

She was not the only one who had noticed. Dumbledore’s right hand was as blackened and dead-looking as it had been on the night he had come to fetch Harry from the Dursleys. Whispers swept the room; Dumbledore, interpreting them correctly, merely smiled and shook his purple-and-gold sleeve over his injury.

“Nothing to worry about,” he said airily. “Now . . . to our new students, welcome, to our old students, welcome back! Another year full of magical education awaits you . . .”

“His hand was like that when I saw him over the summer,” Harry whispered to Hermione. “I thought he’d have cured it by now, though . . . or Madam Pomfrey would’ve done.”

“It looks as if it’s died,” said Hermione, with a nauseated expression. “But there are some injuries you can’t cure . . . old curses . . . and there are poisons without antidotes. . . .”

“. . . and Mr. Filch, our caretaker, has asked me to say that there is a blanket ban on any joke items bought at the shop called Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.

“Those wishing to play for their House Quidditch teams should give their names to their Heads of House as usual. We are also looking for new Quidditch commentators, who should do likewise.

“We are pleased to welcome a new member of staff this year. Professor Slughorn” — Slughorn stood up, his bald head gleaming in the candlelight, his big waistcoated belly casting the table below into shadow — “is a former colleague of mine who has agreed to resume his old post of Potions master.”

“Potions?”

“Potions?”

The word echoed all over the Hall as people wondered whether they had heard right.

“Potions?” said Ron and Hermione together, turning to stare at Harry. “But you said —”

“Professor Snape, meanwhile,” said Dumbledore, raising his voice so that it carried over all the muttering, “will be taking over the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

“No!” said Harry, so loudly that many heads turned in his direction. He did not care; he was staring up at the staff table, incensed. How could Snape be given the Defense Against the Dark Arts job after all this time? Hadn’t it been widely known for years that Dumbledore did not trust him to do it?

“But Harry, you said that Slughorn was going to be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts!” said Hermione.

“I thought he was!” said Harry, racking his brains to remember when Dumbledore had told him this, but now that he came to think of it, he was unable to recall Dumbledore ever telling him what

Slughorn would be teaching.

Snape, who was sitting on Dumbledore's right, did not stand up at the mention of his name; he merely raised a hand in lazy acknowledgment of the applause from the Slytherin table, yet Harry was sure he could detect a look of triumph on the features he loathed so much.

"Well, there's one good thing," he said savagely. "Snape'll be gone by the end of the year."

"What do you mean?" asked Ron.

"That job's jinxed. No one's lasted more than a year. . . . Quirrell actually died doing it. . . . Personally, I'm going to keep my fingers crossed for another death. . . ."

"Harry!" said Hermione, shocked and reproachful.

"He might just go back to teaching Potions at the end of the year," said Ron reasonably. "That Slughorn bloke might not want to stay long-term. Moody didn't."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were not the only ones who had been talking; the whole Hall had erupted in a buzz of conversation at the news that Snape had finally achieved his heart's desire. Seemingly oblivious to the sensational nature of the news he had just imparted, Dumbledore said nothing more about staff appointments, but waited a few seconds to ensure that the silence was absolute before continuing.

"Now, as everybody in this Hall knows, Lord Voldemort and his followers are once more at large and gaining in strength."

The silence seemed to tauten and strain as Dumbledore spoke. Harry glanced at Malfoy. Malfoy was not looking at Dumbledore, but

making his fork hover in midair with his wand, as though he found the headmaster's words unworthy of his attention.

“I cannot emphasize strongly enough how dangerous the present situation is, and how much care each of us at Hogwarts must take to ensure that we remain safe. The castle's magical fortifications have been strengthened over the summer, we are protected in new and more powerful ways, but we must still guard scrupulously against carelessness on the part of any student or member of staff. I urge you, therefore, to abide by any security restrictions that your teachers might impose upon you, however irksome you might find them — in particular, the rule that you are not to be out of bed after hours. I implore you, should you notice anything strange or suspicious within or outside the castle, to report it to a member of staff immediately. I trust you to conduct yourselves, always, with the utmost regard for your own and others' safety.”

Dumbledore's blue eyes swept over the students before he smiled once more.

“But now, your beds await, as warm and comfortable as you could possibly wish, and I know that your top priority is to be well-rested for your lessons tomorrow. Let us therefore say good night. Pip pip!”

With the usual deafening scraping noise, the benches were moved back and the hundreds of students began to file out of the Great Hall toward their dormitories. Harry, who was in no hurry at all to leave with the gawping crowd, nor to get near enough to Malfoy to allow him to retell the story of the nose-stamping, lagged behind, pretending to retie the lace on his trainer, allowing most of the Gryffindors to draw ahead of him. Hermione had darted ahead to fulfill her prefect's

duty of shepherding the first years, but Ron remained with Harry.

“What really happened to your nose?” he asked, once they were at the very back of the throng pressing out of the Hall, and out of earshot of anyone else.

Harry told him. It was a mark of the strength of their friendship that Ron did not laugh.

“I saw Malfoy miming something to do with a nose,” he said darkly.

“Yeah, well, never mind that,” said Harry bitterly. “Listen to what he was saying before he found out I was there. . . .”

Harry had expected Ron to be stunned by Malfoy’s boasts. With what Harry considered pure pigheadedness, however, Ron was unimpressed.

“Come on, Harry, he was just showing off for Parkinson. . . . What kind of mission would You-Know-Who have given him?”

“How d’you know Voldemort doesn’t need someone at Hogwarts? It wouldn’t be the first —”

“I wish yeh’d stop sayin’ tha’ name, Harry,” said a reproachful voice behind them. Harry looked over his shoulder to see Hagrid shaking his head.

“Dumbledore uses that name,” said Harry stubbornly.

“Yeah, well, tha’s Dumbledore, innit?” said Hagrid mysteriously. “So how come yeh were late, Harry? I was worried.”

“Got held up on the train,” said Harry. “Why were *you* late?”

“I was with Grawp,” said Hagrid happily. “Los’ track o’ the time. He’s got a new home up in the mountains now, Dumbledore fixed it — nice big cave. He’s much happier than he was in the forest. We

were havin' a good chat."

"Really?" said Harry, taking care not to catch Ron's eye; the last time he had met Hagrid's half-brother, a vicious giant with a talent for ripping up trees by the roots, his vocabulary had comprised five words, two of which he was unable to pronounce properly.

"Oh yeah, he's really come on," said Hagrid proudly. "Yeh'll be amazed. I'm thinkin' o' trainin' him up as me assistant."

Ron snorted loudly, but managed to pass it off as a violent sneeze. They were now standing beside the oak front doors.

"Anyway, I'll see yeh tomorrow, firs' lesson's straight after lunch. Come early an' yeh can say hello ter Buck — I mean, Witherwings!"

Raising an arm in cheery farewell, he headed out of the front doors into the darkness.

Harry and Ron looked at each other. Harry could tell that Ron was experiencing the same sinking feeling as himself.

"You're not taking Care of Magical Creatures, are you?"

Ron shook his head. "And you're not either, are you?"

Harry shook his head too.

"And Hermione," said Ron, "she's not, is she?"

Harry shook his head again. Exactly what Hagrid would say when he realized his three favorite students had given up his subject, he did not like to think.

Snape se Sege

Harry kan nie 'n spier verroer nie. Hy lê onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel en voel hoe die bloed warm en nat uit sy neus loop terwyl hy na die stemme en voetstappe in die gang en op die perron luister. Sy eerste gedagte is dat iemand tog sekerlik die kompartemente sal nagaan voor die trein weer vertrek? Maar hy besef terselfdertyd dat selfs al sou iemand by die kompartement inloer, hulle hom nie sal sien of hoor nie. Sy enigste hoop is dat iemand hier sal inkom en op hom trap.

Harry haat Malfoy soos nog nooit vantevore nie nou dat hy soos 'n hulpelose skilpad op sy rug lê, met bloed wat tot siekwordens toe in sy oop mond drup. Wat 'n simpel situasie om in te beland ... Die laaste paar voetstappe sterf in die gang weg; almal is al buite op die perron; hy hoor hoe studente hul trommels agter hulle aansleep en hard onder mekaar babbel.

Ron en Hermione sal dink hy het sonder hulle van die trein afgeklim. Teen die tyd dat hulle by Hogwarts kom en hul plekke in die Groot Saal inneem en 'n paar keer op en af met Gryffindor se tafel kyk en uiteindelik besef hy is nie daar nie, sal hy ongetwyfeld al halfpad terug Londen toe wees.

Hy probeer 'n geluid maak, selfs net om te snork, maar dit is onmoontlik. Dan onthou hy dat party towenaars soos Dumbledore towerspreuke kan uitvoer sonder om te praat en hy probeer sy towerstaf wat uit sy hand geval het, te ontbied deur die woorde *Accio towerstaf!* oor en oor in sy kop te sê, maar daar gebeur niks.

Hy verbeel hom hy hoor die bome wat om die meer groei, ritsel en die veraf gehoe-hoe van 'n uil, maar daar is geen geluide van iemand wat na hom soek of selfs (hy haat homself half dat hy dit hoop) paniekerige stemme wat wonder wat van Harry Potter geword het nie. Daar kom 'n gevoel van magteloosheid oor hom wanneer hy dink aan die Testrals wat die konvooi koetse op skool toe trek en die gedempte gelag uit die koets waarin Malfoy is, want teen hierdie tyd het hy sy mede-Slytherins natuurlik al vir die hoeveelste keer van sy aanval op Harry vertel.

Die trein ruk en Harry rol op sy sy. Nou kyk hy vas in die stof onder die sitplekke pleks van die plafon. Die vloer begin vibreer soos wat die lokomotief brullend aan die gang kom. Die Express vertrek en niemand weet hy is nog in die trein nie ...

Skielik voel hy sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel van hom af vlieg en hoor hy 'n stem bokant hom sê: "Hoe's dinge, Harry?"

Daar flits 'n rooi ligstraal en Harry se liggaam ontvries; hy kom regop in 'n meer waardige sitposisie, vee haastig die bloed met sy hand se agterkant van sy gekneusde gesig af, lig sy kop en kyk na Tonks wat daar staan met die Onsigbaarheidsmantel wat sy van hom afgeruk het.

"Ons beter vinnig hier wegkom," sê sy. Die trein se vensters is al toe van die stoom en die Express begin by die stasie uitbeweeg. "Komaan, ons moet spring!"

Harry strompel agter haar aan gang toe. Tonks pluk die wa se deur oop en spring tot op die perron wat lyk of dit onder hulle uitgly soos wat die trein voortstoom. Harry volg haar, swik effens toe hy land, maar kom betyds regop om te sien hoe die glinsterende helderrooi lokomotief spoed optel en om die hoek uit sig verdwyn.

Die koue naglug streel sy kloppende neus. Tonks kyk na hom; hy is kwaad en skaam dat iemand hom in so 'n belaglike posisie moes aantref. Sonder om iets te sê, gee sy die Onsigbaarheidsmantel vir hom terug.

"Wie't dit gedoen?"

"Draco Malfoy," sê Harry bitter. "Dankie vir ... wel ..."

"G'n probleem nie," sê Tonks sonder om te glimlag. Volgens wat Harry in die donker kan uitmaak, is haar hare nog steeds so muis-keurig en lyk sy nog net so ellendig soos toe hy haar laas by Die Konynenes gesien het. "Ek kan jou neus regmaak as jy stilstaan."

Harry dink nie veel van die idee nie; hy was van plan om na Madame Pomfrey, die matrone in wie hy 'n bietjie meer vertrouwe het wanneer dit by Geneesspreuke kom, toe te gaan, maar dit voel onbeskof om dit vir Tonks te sê, so hy staan stokstil en maak sy oë toe.

"Episkey," sê Tonks.

Harry se neus raak vuurwarm en dan yskoud. Hy lig sy hand en voel versigtig daaraan. Dit voel weer soos altyd. "Baie dankie!"

"Jy beter daai mantel weer aantrek sodat ons op skool toe kan loop," sê Tonks nog steeds sonder 'n glimlag. Terwyl Harry die mantel weer oor hom gooi, swaai sy haar towerstaf. 'n Yslike silwer vierbeendierasie verskyn daaruit en nael die donkerte in.

"Was dit 'n Patronus?" vra Harry wat al gesien het hoe Dumbledore sulke boodskappe stuur.

“Ja, ek laat weet hulle by die kasteel dat ek jou gekry het, anders sal hulle bekommerd wees. Komaan, ons moenie tyd mors nie.”

Hulle begin aanstap na die laning wat skool toe lei.

“Hoe het jy my gekry?”

“Ek het gesien jy’s nie op die perron nie en ek het geweet jy het die mantel. Ek het gedink jy kruip om die een of ander rede weg. En toe ek sien daardie kompartement se blindings is toe, het ek besluit om ondersoek in te stel.”

“Maar wat doen jy in elk geval hier?” vra Harry.

“Ek is nou in Hogsmeade gestasioneer vir ekstra beskerming vir die skool,” sê Tonks.

“Is dit net jy wat hier bo gestasioneer is of – ?”

“Nee, Proudfoot, Savage en Dawlish is ook hier.”

“Dawlish, daardie Auror vir wie Dumbledore laas jaar aangeval het?”

“Dis reg.”

Hulle loop met die donker, verlate laning op en volg die koetse se vars spore. Harry bekijk Tonks van onder sy mantel. Laas jaar was sy nuuskierig (só erg dat sy hom soms nogal geïrriteer het), en sy het gelag en grappe gemaak. Nou lyk sy ouer en baie ernstiger en vasberade. Is dit alles as gevolg van wat by die Ministerie gebeur het? Hy voel ongemaklik as hy daaraan dink dat Hermione sou voorgestel het dat hy iets moet sê om haar oor Sirius te troos, dat hy moet sê dit was nie haar skuld nie, maar hy kan homself nie sover kry om dit te doen nie. Hy blameer haar glad nie vir Sirius se dood nie; dit was net so min haar skuld as enigiemand anders s’n (en baie minder as syne), maar hy verkies om eerder nie oor Sirius te praat nie. Daarom stap hulle in stilte deur die koue nag terwyl Tonks se lang mantel oor die grond agter hulle swiesj.

Harry het nog altyd net per koets Hogwarts toe gery en nooit besef hoe ver die skool van Hogsmeade se stasie af is nie. Hy is baie verlig toe hy uiteindelik die hoë pilare aan weerskante van die hekke met die gevleuelde varkbere op sien. Hy kry koud en is honger, en hy wil nou vir hierdie nuwe, mistroostige Tonks tot siens sê. Maar toe hy sy hand uitsteek om die hekke oop te stoot, sien hy hulle is met kettings vasgemaak en gesluit.

“Alohomora!” sê hy selfversekerd en wys met sy towerstaf na die hangslot, maar niks gebeur nie.

“Dit sal nie hierop werk nie,” sê Tonks. “Dumbledore het hulle self toegetoor.”

Harry kyk om.

“Ek kan oor die muur klim,” stel hy voor.

“Nee, jy kan nie,” sê Tonks uitdrukkingloos. “Daar is Anti-indringersvloeke op almal. Die sekuriteit is hierdie somer ’n honderd maal verskerp.”

“Nou ja,” sê Harry wat hom begin vervies dat sy so onbehulpzaam is, “dan sal ek hier buite slaap en tot môre wag.”

“Iemand kom vir jou oopmaak,” sê Tonks. “Kyk.”

Ver weg, aan die voet van die kasteel, wip ’n lantern op en af. Harry is so bly daaroor dat hy selfs kans sien vir Filch se hygende gekerm oor hy so laat is en sy voorstelle dat die gereelde toediening van duimskroewe Harry sal help om meer stiptelik te wees. Eers toe die gloeiende geel lig tien voet van hulle af is en Harry sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel afgehaal het sodat hy sigbaar kan wees, herken hy met ’n opwelling van afsku die haakneus en lang, swart, olierige hare van Severus Snape.

“Nou toe nou,” sê Snape grimmig terwyl hy sy towerstaf uithaal en teen die slot tik sodat die kettings soos slange wegkrul en die hekke kreunend oopgaan. “Gaaf van jou om jou opwagting te maak, Potter, hoewel jy oënskynlik besluit het dit sal afbreuk aan jou voorkoms doen om jou skooltoga te dra.”

“Ek kon dit nie aantrek nie, want ek het nie my —” begin Harry, maar Snape onderbreek hom.

“Jy hoef nie te wag nie, Nymphadora. Potter is heeltemal — e — veilig in my hande.”

“Ek wou hê Hagrid moes my boodskap kry,” sê Tonks fronsend.

“Hagrid was laat vir ons begin-van-die-kwartaal-fees, nes Potter hier; daarom het ek dit in ontvangs geneem. En terloops,” sê Snape terwyl hy terugstaan sodat Harry kan verbykom. “Ek het jou nuwe Patronus interessant gevind.”

Hy maak die hekke met ’n harde klapgeluid in haar gesig toe en tik met sy towerstaf teen die kettingslange. Hulle seil dadelik terug in posisie en die slot klik toe.

“Ek dink die ou een was beter,” sê Snape met openlike venyn in sy stem. “Hierdie nuwe een lyk swak.”

Harry sien vir ’n oomblik die uitdrukking van skok and woede op Tonks se gesig in die lig van Snape se lantern. Dan sluk die donker haar weer in.

“Nag,” roep Harry oor sy skouer terwyl hy saam met Snape op skool toe begin stap. “Dankie vir ... alles.”

“Sien jou, Harry.”

Snape praat die eerste rukkie glad nie. Harry voel sulke sterk golwe van haat deur sy lyf spoel dat hy nie kan glo dit brand Snape nie. Hy verpes Snape al van hulle mekaar die eerste keer ontmoet

het, maar Snape se houding teenoor Sirius het gemaak dat Harry hom vir ewig en altyd sal haat. Al sê Dumbledore ook wat, Harry het hierdie somer mooi oor alles nagedink en besluit Snape se smalende opmerkings teenoor Sirius oor hom wat kastig veilig wegkruip terwyl die res van die Orde van die Feniks teen Voldemort veg, was een van die groot redes hoekom Sirius die aand van sy dood inderhaas na die Ministerie toe is. Harry klou vas aan hierdie gedagte, want dit beteken hy kan Snape blameer, en dit voel goed. Verder weet hy ook dat as daar iemand is wat nie spyt is oor Sirius se dood nie, dan is dit die man wat nou hier langs hom in die donker loop.

“Gryffindor verloor vyftig punte omdat jy laat is,” sê Snape. “En laat my sien, nog twintig oor jou Moggelklere. Ek dink nie enige huis het ooit al so vroeg in die kwartaal ’n minustelling gehad nie – ons het nog nie eens nagereg gehad nie. Jy’t ’n rekord opgestel, Potter.”

Die woede en haat wat binne-in Harry opbou, is ’n witwarm vlam, maar hy sal eerder versteen heelpad terug Londen toe ry as om vir Snape te sê hoekom hy laat is.

“Ek veronderstel jy wou ’n dramatiese aankoms hê, nè?” gaan Snape aan. “En aangesien daar nie ’n vlieënde kar beskikbaar was nie, het jy besluit om halfpad deur die fees by die Groot Saal in te paradeer.”

Harry bly nog steeds stil, al voel dit of sy borskas gaan ontplof. Hy weet Snape het hom hiervoor kom haal; vir die paar minute wat hy Harry kan treiter en tart sonder dat enigiemand anders dit hoor.

Hulle kom uiteindelik by die kasteel se breë trap aan en toe die groot eikehoutvoordeure oopswaai en hulle by die reuse-Ingangsportaal vol vlae instap, begroet ’n gelag en gepraat en gerinkel van borde en glase uit die Groot Saal hulle. Harry oorweeg dit om sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel weer oor hom te gooi en ongemerk by die lang Gryffindor-tafel (wat heel ongerieflik die verste van die Ingangsportaal af is) aan te sluit.

Maar asof hy Harry se gedagtes lees, sê Snape: “Geen mantel nie. Jy gaan so instap dat almal jou kan sien. Dis mos wat jy wou gehad het, of hoe?”

Harry loop by die oop deure in; enigiets om van Snape af weg te kom. Die Groot Saal met sy vier lang huistafels en personeeltafel aan die bopunt van die vertrek is soos gewoonlik versier met swewende kerse wat die borde onder hulle laat glinster en gloei. Dit is alles ’n glansende waas vir Harry wat só vinnig loop dat hy al verby Hoesenproes se tafel is voor die mense regtig begin staar, en teen die tyd

dat hulle opstaan om hom beter te kan sien, het hy al vir Ron en Hermione opgemerk en haas hy hom met die banke langs tot by hulle en druk tussen die twee in.

“Waar was jy – dêmmit, wat het jy met jou gesig gedoen?” vra Ron en gaap hom net so verstom soos al die ander in die omtrek aan.

“Hoekom? Wat’s verkeerd daarmee?” vra Harry. Hy gryp ’n lepel en loer na sy misvormde weerkaatsing.

“Jy’s die ene bloed!” sê Hermione. “Kom hier –”

Sy lig haar towerstaf, sê “*Tergeo!*” en suig die droë bloed op.

“Dankie,” sê Harry en voel aan sy gesig wat nou skoon is. “Hoe lyk my neus?”

“Normaal,” sê Hermione bekommerd. “Hoekom sal dit nie wees nie? Harry, wat het gebeur? Ons was in ’n toestand oor jou!”

“Ek sal julle later vertel,” sê Harry kortaf. Hy is baie bewus daarvan dat Ginny, Neville, Dean en Seamus ook luister; selfs Nick-amper-sonder-kop, Gryffindor se spook, kom aangesweef om af te luister.

“Maar –” sê Hermione.

“Nie nou nie, Hermione,” sê Harry in ’n donker, besliste stem. Hy hoop maar net almal sal aanvaar hy was by iets heldhaftigs betrokke, verkieslik ’n geveg met ’n paar Doodseters en ’n Dementor. Malfoy sal die storie natuurlik so ver en wyd moontlik versprei, maar daar bestaan ’n kans dat dit nie te veel Gryffindor-ore sal bereik nie.

Hy rek oor Ron om vir hom ’n paar hoenderboudjies en ’n hand vol skyfies te vat, maar voor hy kan, verdwyn dit en word deur poedings vervang.

“Jy’t die Sorteerdery gemis,” sê Hermione terwyl Ron ’n groot homp sjokoladekoek gryp.

“Het die Hoed enigiets interessants gesê?” vra Harry en vat ’n stukkie strooptert.

“Min of meer dieselfde as altyd ... Hy sê ons moet almal saamstaan teen die aanslag van ons vyande, daai soort ding.”

“Het Dumbledore enigiets van Voldemort gesê?”

“Nog nie, maar hy hou altyd sy eintlike toespraak vir ná die fees, nie waar nie? Dit kan nie nou meer lank wees nie.”

“Snape sê Hagrid was laat vir die fees –”

“Jy’t vir Snape gesien? Hoe so?” vra Ron terwyl hy sy mond koorsagtig vol koek stop.

“Hom toevallig raakgeloop,” sê Harry ontwykend.

“Hagrid was net ’n paar minute laat,” sê Hermione. “Kyk, hy waai vir jou, Harry.”

Harry kyk op na die personeeltafel en grinnik vir Hagrid wat inderdaad vir hom waai. Hagrid het dit nog nooit juis reggekry om hom so waardig te gedra soos professor McGonagall, Gryffindor se hoof, nie; haar kop kom tot iewers tussen Hagrid se elmboog en skouer daar waar hulle sy aan sy sit, en sy kyk hom afkeurend aan omdat hy Harry so geesdriftig groet. Harry is verbaas om professor Trelawny wat vir hulle Voorspellings gee aan Hagrid se ander kant te sien sit; sy verlaat haar toringkamer selde en hy het haar nog nooit by 'n begin-van-die-kwartaal-fees gesien nie. Sy lyk so vreemd soos altyd, met glinsterende krale en swaaiende tjalties, haar oë reusagtig vergroot deur haar enorme bril. Harry het haar nog altyd as bietjie van 'n bedrieër beskou en was geskok toe hy aan die einde van die vorige kwartaal ontdek dit was sy wat die voorspelling gemaak het wat daartoe gelei het dat die Heer Voldemort Harry se ouers doodgemaak en hom aangeval het. Hierdie wete maak hom selfs nog minder lus om in haar geselskap te wees, maar genadiglik gaan hy nie vanjaar met Voorspellings aan nie. Haar groot oë, wat soos ligbakens lyk, draai in sy rigting; hy kyk haastig weg na die Slytherin-tafel. Draco Malfoy beduie onder luidrugtige gelag en applous hoe 'n neus aan flarde spat. Harry kyk af na sy strooptert en sy binnegoed brand weer. Hy sal wát gee om Malfoy man teen man aan te vat ...

“So wat wou professor Slughorn hê?” vra Hermione.

“Hy wil weet wat regtig by die Ministerie gebeur het,” sê Harry.

“Hy en al die ander hier,” sê Hermione en trek haar neus op. “Die mense het ons al op die trein daaroor uitgevra, nè, Ron?”

“Jip,” sê Ron. “Almal wil weet of jy rêrig die Uitverkorene is –”

“Daar word baie daaroor bespiegel, selfs onder die spoke,” val Nick-amper-sonder-kop Ron in die rede en draai sy kop, wat skaars nog aan sy lyf vas is, na Harry sodat dit gevaarlik op sy plooi kraag kantel. “Ek word as ietwat van 'n Potter-kenner beskou; dit is algemeen bekend dat ons bevriend is. Ek het die geestegemeenskap egter verseker dat ek nie aan jou gaan torring vir inligting nie. ‘Harry Potter weet hy kan my met die grootste vrymoedigheid in sy vertroue neem,’ het ek vir hulle gesê. ‘Ek sterf eerder as om sy vertroue in my te skend.’”

“Dit sê nie veel nie, siende dat jy al klaar dood is,” merk Ron op.

“Jy toon weer eens die sensitiwiteit van 'n stomp byl,” sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop gebelgd. Hy styg in die lug op en gly terug na die verste end van die Gryffindor-tafel terwyl Dumbledore by die personeeltafel op die been kom. Die gepraat en gelag wat deur die saal eggo, hou omtrent oombliklik op.

“Die allerbeste goeienaand aan almal!” sê hy en glimlag breed terwyl hy sy arms wyd oopmaak asof hy die hele vertrek omhels.

“Wat het met sy hand gebeur?” snak Hermione.

Sy is nie die enigste een wat dit opmerk nie. Dumbledore se regterhand lyk nog net so swart en dood soos die aand toe hy Harry by die Dursleys kom haal het. Daar trek ’n gefluister deur die vertrek. Dumbledore weet dadelik waarom dit gaan; hy glimlag net en skud sy purper en goue kleeed se mou sodat dit sy besering toemaak.

“Niks om oor bekommerd te wees nie,” sê hy lig. “En nou ... aan ons nuwe studente, welkom; aan ons ou studente; welkom terug! Daar wag nóg ’n jaar van magiese onderrig op julle ...”

“Sy hand het al so gelyk toe ek hom dié somer gesien het,” fluister Harry vir Hermione. “Ek het gedink hy sou dit nou al genees het ... of Madame Pomfrey sou dit gedoen het.”

“Dit lyk of dit dood is,” sê Hermione, vervul met weersin. “Daar is party beserings wat nie gesond gemaak kan word nie ... ou vloeke ... en daar is party soorte gif waarvoor daar nie ’n teenmiddel is nie ...”

“... en meneer Filch, ons opsigter, het my gevra om vir almal te sê daar is ’n algehele verbod op enige poetsartikels wat by Weasley’s se Wonderpoetse gekoop is.

“Diegene wat vir hul huis se Kwiddiek-span wil speel, moet hul name soos gewoonlik vir die Huishoofde gee. Ons soek nuwe Kwiddiek-komentators, dus kan belangstellendes hul name ook ingee.

“Dis vir ons ’n genoeë om vanjaar ’n nuwe personeellid te verwelkom. Professor Slughorn,” Slughorn staan op; sy bleskop blink in die kerslig en die tamaai maag onder sy onderbaadjie gooi ’n skaduwee oor die tafel voor hom, “is ’n voormalige kollega van my wat ingestem het om weer sy ou pos as Towerdrankiemeester te bekleë.”

“Towerdrankies?”

“Towerdrankies?”

Die woord eggo deur die Saal soos mense wonder of hulle reg gehoor het.

“Towerdrankies?” sê Ron en Hermione saam en draai na Harry. “Maar jy’t gesê – ”

“Gevolglik sal professor Snape,” gaan Dumbledore voort en verhef sy stem effens sodat dit bo al die gemompel hoorbaar kan wees, “die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-pos oorneem.”

“Nee!” sê Harry so hard dat menige koppe in sy rigting draai. Hy gee nie om nie; hy kyk smoorkwaad na die personeeltafel. Hoe kan

Snape ná al hierdie tyd die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-pos kry? Almal weet tog Dumbledore vertrou hom al jare lank nie daarmee nie?

“Maar Harry, jy’t gesê Slughorn gaan die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-onderwyser wees!” sê Hermione.

“Dis wat ek gedink het!” sê Harry en probeer hard uitwerk wanneer Dumbledore dit vir hom gesê het, maar noudat hy daaraan dink, kan hy nie onthou dat Dumbledore ooit vir hom vertel het wat Slughorn gaan gee nie.

Snape, wat aan Dumbledore se regterkant sit, staan nie op toe sy naam genoem word nie. Hy lig sy hand net lui uit erkenning vir die Slytherin-tafel se applous, maar Harry is seker hy sien ’n uitdrukking van triomf op daardie gesig wat hy so verag.

“Wel, daar’s een ding waaroor ons bly kan wees,” sê hy hatig. “Snape sal teen die einde van die jaar weg wees.”

“Wat bedoel jy?” vra Ron.

“Daai pos is vervloek. Niemand hou langer as ’n jaar nie ... Quirrell is sommer in die pos dood. Ek gaan duim vashou dat nog iemand doodgaan ...”

“Harry!” sê Hermione geskok en verwytend.

“Hy sal dalk aan die einde van die jaar weer terug Towerdrankies toe moet gaan,” sê Ron nugter. “Daai Slughorn-ou gaan dalk nie langer as ’n kwartaal wil bly nie. Moody het nie.”

Dumbledore maak sy keel skoon. Harry, Ron en Hermione is nie die enigstes wat gesels nie; die hele saal is diep in gesprek oor die nuus dat Snape se hartsbegeerte uiteindelik waar geword het. Oënskynlik onbewus van hoeveel sensasie die nuus veroorsaak het wat hy almal so pas meegedeel het, sê Dumbledore niks meer oor personeelaanstellings nie, maar wag ’n paar sekondes om totale stilte te verseker voor hy aangaan.

“Nou ja, soos almal in hierdie saal weet, is die Heer Voldemort en sy volgelingen weer eens op vrye voete en neem hul mag steeds toe.” Die stilte span al stywer terwyl Dumbledore praat.

Harry loer onderlangs na Malfoy, wat nie vir Dumbledore kyk nie en sy towerstaf gebruik om sy vurk voor hom te laat sweef asof hy voel die skoolhoof se woorde is nie sy aandag werd nie.

“Ek kan nie sterk genoeg beklemtoon hoe gevaarlik die huidige situasie is nie; elkeen van ons hier by Hogwarts moet uiters versigtig wees om te verseker dat ons veilig bly. Die kasteel se magiese verdediging is gedurende die somer versterk, ons word nou op nuwe en kragtiger maniere beskerm, maar ons moet nogtans nougeset waak teen nalatigheid aan die kant van enige student of personeellid. Ek

versoek julle dus dringend om streng te hou by enige sekuriteitsmaatreëls waaraan julle onderwysers julle onderwerp, al vind julle dit ook hoe onaangenaam – veral die reël dat julle enigiets vreemds of verdags binne of buite die kasteel onmiddellik aan 'n personeel-lid moet rapporteer. Ek vertrou dat julle altyd met die grootste agting vir julle eie en mekaar se veiligheid sal optree.”

Dumbledore se blou oë vee oor die studente voor hom voordat hy weer glimlag.

“Maar nou wag die warmste en gemaklikste beddens waarvan enigiemand kan droom op julle, en ek weet dit is julle topprioriteit om môre goed uitgerus te wees vir julle klasse. Laat ons dus goeie-nag sê. Voorspoed, almal!”

Met die gewone oorverdowende skuurgeluid word die banke teruggeskuif en honderde studente begin by die Groot Saal uitloop op pad na hul slaapsale. Harry is nie haastig om saam met die starrende menigte uit te gaan nie en wil ook nie naby genoeg aan Malfoy kom sodat hy weer met sy neusbreekstorie kan begin nie, daarom wen hy tyd deur te maak of hy sy tekkie se veter vasmaak terwyl die meeste Gryffindors voor hom uitloop. Hermione is haastig vooruit om haar plig as prefek na te kom en die eerstejaars te begelei, maar Ron bly by Harry.

“Wat het rêrig met jou neus gebeur?” vra hy toe die ergste gedrang by die saal uit is en niemand anders hulle kan hoor nie.

Harry vertel hom. Die feit dat Ron nie lag nie, is 'n teken van hoe heg hul vriendskap is.

“Ek het gesien Malfoy beduie iets van 'n neus,” sê hy somber.

“Ja, maar vergeet nou daarvan,” sê Harry bitter. “Laat ek jou eerder vertel wat hy gesê het voor hy uitgevind het ek is daar ...”

Harry het gedink Ron sal verstom wees oor Malfoy se grootpraterij. Maar Harry besluit dit is pure koppigheid dat Ron glad nie beïndruk is nie.

“Komaan, Harry, hy't hom net probeer wintie hou voor Parkinson ... Op watter sending sal Jy-Weet-Wie hom tog nou stuur?”

“Hoe weet jy Voldemort het nie iemand in Hogwarts nodig nie? Dit sal nie die eerste keer wees dat –”

“Ek wens jy wil ophou om daai naam so rond te gooi,” sê 'n verwytende stem agter hulle. Harry kyk oor sy skouer en sien hoe Hagrid sy kop skud.

“Dumbledore gebruik daai naam,” sê Harry astrant.

“Ja wel, hy's Dumbledore,” sê Hagrid geheimsinnig. “So vir wat was jy laat, Harry? Ek was bekommerd oor jou.”

“Ek's in die trein opgehou,” sê Harry. “Hoekom was jy laat?”

“Ek was by Ghrop,” sê Hagrid gelukkig. “Skoon van tyd vergeet. Hy’t nou ’n nuwe huis bo in die berge. Dumbledore het dit vir hom gekry – lekker groot grot. Hy’s nou baie gelukkiger as wat hy in die Woud was. Ons het lekker gesels.”

“Regtig?” vra Harry en kyk doelbewus nie vir Ron nie. Die laaste keer dat hy Hagrid se halfbroer gesien het, ’n boosaardige reus met ’n talent om bome aan hul wortels uit die grond te pluk, het sy woordeskat uit vyf woorde bestaan waarvan hy twee nie ordentlik kon uitspreek nie.

“O ja, hy kom rêrig mooi reg,” sê Hagrid trots. “Julle sal verstom wees. Ek begin dink ek moet hom oplei om my assistent te wees.”

Ron snork hard, maar kry dit reg om dit na ’n hewige nies te laat klink. Hulle staan nou langs die eikehoutvoordeur.

“Elk geval, sien julle môre, eerste les net ná middagete. Kom vroeg, dan kan julle hallo sê vir Bok – ek bedoel, Flinkvlerk!”

Hagrid lig sy arm in ’n opgewekte groetgebaar en loop die donkerte in.

Harry en Ron kyk vir mekaar. Harry kan sien Ron kry dieselfde nare gevoel as hy. “Jy gaan nie Versorging van Magiese Kreature bywoon nie, gaan jy?”

Ron skud sy kop.

“En jy gaan ook nie, gaan jy?”

Harry skud ook sy kop.

“En Hermione,” sê Ron, “gaan ook nie, gaan sy?”

Harry skud weer sy kop. Hy sidder om te dink wat Hagrid gaan sê wanneer hy uitvind sy drie gunstelingstudente het sy vak gelos.

CHAPTER NINE



THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE

Harry and Ron met Hermione in the common room before breakfast next morning. Hoping for some support for his theory, Harry lost no time in telling Hermione what he had overheard Malfoy saying on the Hogwarts Express.

“But he was obviously showing off for Parkinson, wasn’t he?” interjected Ron quickly, before Hermione could say anything.

“Well,” she said uncertainly, “I don’t know. . . . It would be like Malfoy to make himself seem more important than he is . . . but that’s a big lie to tell. . . .”

“Exactly,” said Harry, but he could not press the point, because so

many people were trying to listen in to his conversation, not to mention staring at him and whispering behind their hands.

“It’s rude to point,” Ron snapped at a particularly minuscule first-year boy as they joined the queue to climb out of the portrait hole. The boy, who had been muttering something about Harry behind his hand to his friend, promptly turned scarlet and toppled out of the hole in alarm. Ron sniggered.

“I love being a sixth year. *And* we’re going to be getting free time this year. Whole periods when we can just sit up here and relax.”

“We’re going to need that time for studying, Ron!” said Hermione, as they set off down the corridor.

“Yeah, but not today,” said Ron. “Today’s going to be a real doss, I reckon.”

“Hold it!” said Hermione, throwing out an arm and halting a passing fourth year, who was attempting to push past her with a lime-green disk clutched tightly in his hand. “Fanged Frisbees are banned, hand it over,” she told him sternly. The scowling boy handed over the snarling Frisbee, ducked under her arm, and took off after his friends. Ron waited for him to vanish, then tugged the Frisbee from Hermione’s grip.

“Excellent, I’ve always wanted one of these.”

Hermione’s remonstrations were drowned by a loud giggle; Lavender Brown had apparently found Ron’s remark highly amusing. She continued to laugh as she passed them, glancing back at Ron over her shoulder. Ron looked rather pleased with himself.

The ceiling of the Great Hall was serenely blue and streaked with frail, wispy clouds, just like the squares of sky visible through the

high mullioned windows. While they tucked into porridge and eggs and bacon, Harry and Ron told Hermione about their embarrassing conversation with Hagrid the previous evening.

“But he can’t really think we’d continue Care of Magical Creatures!” she said, looking distressed. “I mean, when has any of us expressed . . . you know . . . any enthusiasm?”

“That’s it, though, innit?” said Ron, swallowing an entire fried egg whole. “We were the ones who made the most effort in classes because we like Hagrid. But he thinks we liked the stupid *subject*. D’you reckon anyone’s going to go on to N.E.W.T.?”

Neither Harry nor Hermione answered; there was no need. They knew perfectly well that nobody in their year would want to continue Care of Magical Creatures. They avoided Hagrid’s eye and returned his cheery wave only halfheartedly when he left the staff table ten minutes later.

After they had eaten, they remained in their places, awaiting Professor McGonagall’s descent from the staff table. The distribution of class schedules was more complicated than usual this year, for Professor McGonagall needed first to confirm that everybody had achieved the necessary O.W.L. grades to continue with their chosen N.E.W.T.s.

Hermione was immediately cleared to continue with Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Herbology, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Potions, and shot off to a first-period Ancient Runes class without further ado. Neville took a little longer to sort out; his round face was anxious as Professor McGonagall looked down his application and then consulted his O.W.L. results.

“Herbology, fine,” she said. “Professor Sprout will be delighted to see you back with an ‘Outstanding’ O.W.L. And you qualify for Defense Against the Dark Arts with ‘Exceeds Expectations.’ But the problem is Transfiguration. I’m sorry, Longbottom, but an ‘Acceptable’ really isn’t good enough to continue to N.E.W.T. level. I just don’t think you’d be able to cope with the coursework.”

Neville hung his head. Professor McGonagall peered at him through her square spectacles.

“Why do you want to continue with Transfiguration, anyway? I’ve never had the impression that you particularly enjoyed it.”

Neville looked miserable and muttered something about “my grandmother wants.”

“Hmph,” snorted Professor McGonagall. “It’s high time your grandmother learned to be proud of the grandson she’s got, rather than the one she thinks she ought to have — particularly after what happened at the Ministry.”

Neville turned very pink and blinked confusedly; Professor McGonagall had never paid him a compliment before.

“I’m sorry, Longbottom, but I cannot let you into my N.E.W.T. class. I see that you have an ‘Exceeds Expectations’ in Charms, however — why not try for a N.E.W.T. in Charms?”

“My grandmother thinks Charms is a soft option,” mumbled Neville.

“Take Charms,” said Professor McGonagall, “and I shall drop Augusta a line reminding her that just because she failed *her* Charms O.W.L., the subject is not necessarily worthless.” Smiling slightly at the look of delighted incredulity on Neville’s face, Professor

McGonagall tapped a blank schedule with the tip of her wand and handed it, now carrying details of his new classes, to Neville.

Professor McGonagall turned next to Parvati Patil, whose first question was whether Firenze, the handsome centaur, was still teaching Divination.

“He and Professor Trelawney are dividing classes between them this year,” said Professor McGonagall, a hint of disapproval in her voice; it was common knowledge that she despised the subject of Divination. “The sixth year is being taken by Professor Trelawney.”

Parvati set off for Divination five minutes later looking slightly crestfallen.

“So, Potter, Potter . . .” said Professor McGonagall, consulting her notes as she turned to Harry. “Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Transfiguration . . . all fine. I must say, I was pleased with your Transfiguration mark, Potter, very pleased. Now, why haven’t you applied to continue with Potions? I thought it was your ambition to become an Auror?”

“It was, but you told me I had to get an ‘Outstanding’ in my O.W.L., Professor.”

“And so you did when Professor Snape was teaching the subject. Professor Slughorn, however, is perfectly happy to accept N.E.W.T. students with ‘Exceeds Expectations’ at O.W.L. Do you wish to proceed with Potions?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “but I didn’t buy the books or any ingredients or anything —”

“I’m sure Professor Slughorn will be able to lend you some,” said Professor McGonagall. “Very well, Potter, here is your schedule. Oh,

by the way — twenty hopefuls have already put down their names for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. I shall pass the list to you in due course and you can fix up trials at your leisure.”

A few minutes later, Ron was cleared to do the same subjects as Harry, and the two of them left the table together.

“Look,” said Ron delightedly, gazing at his schedule, “we’ve got a free period now . . . and a free period after break . . . and after lunch . . . *excellent!*”

They returned to the common room, which was empty apart from a half dozen seventh years, including Katie Bell, the only remaining member of the original Gryffindor Quidditch team that Harry had joined in his first year.

“I thought you’d get that, well done,” she called over, pointing at the Captain’s badge on Harry’s chest. “Tell me when you call trials!”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Harry, “you don’t need to try out, I’ve watched you play for five years. . . .”

“You mustn’t start off like that,” she said warningly. “For all you know, there’s someone much better than me out there. Good teams have been ruined before now because Captains just kept playing the old faces, or letting in their friends. . . .”

Ron looked a little uncomfortable and began playing with the Fanged Frisbee Hermione had taken from the fourth-year student. It zoomed around the common room, snarling and attempting to take bites of the tapestry. Crookshanks’s yellow eyes followed it and he hissed when it came too close.

An hour later they reluctantly left the sunlit common room for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom four floors below.

Hermione was already queuing outside, carrying an armful of heavy books and looking put-upon.

“We got so much homework for Runes,” she said anxiously, when Harry and Ron joined her. “A fifteen-inch essay, two translations, and I’ve got to read these by Wednesday!”

“Shame,” yawned Ron.

“You wait,” she said resentfully. “I bet Snape gives us loads.”

The classroom door opened as she spoke, and Snape stepped into the corridor, his sallow face framed as ever by two curtains of greasy black hair. Silence fell over the queue immediately.

“Inside,” he said.

Harry looked around as they entered. Snape had imposed his personality upon the room already; it was gloomier than usual, as curtains had been drawn over the windows, and was lit by candlelight. New pictures adorned the walls, many of them showing people who appeared to be in pain, sporting grisly injuries or strangely contorted body parts. Nobody spoke as they settled down, looking around at the shadowy, gruesome pictures.

“I have not asked you to take out your books,” said Snape, closing the door and moving to face the class from behind his desk; Hermione hastily dropped her copy of *Confronting the Faceless* back into her bag and stowed it under her chair. “I wish to speak to you, and I want your fullest attention.”

His black eyes roved over their upturned faces, lingering for a fraction of a second longer on Harry’s than anyone else’s.

“You have had five teachers in this subject so far, I believe.”

You believe . . . like you haven’t watched them all come and go,

Snape, hoping you'd be next, thought Harry scathingly.

“Naturally, these teachers will all have had their own methods and priorities. Given this confusion I am surprised so many of you scraped an O.W.L. in this subject. I shall be even more surprised if all of you manage to keep up with the N.E.W.T. work, which will be much more advanced.”

Snape set off around the edge of the room, speaking now in a lower voice; the class craned their necks to keep him in view.

“The Dark Arts,” said Snape, “are many, varied, ever-changing, and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before. You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible.”

Harry stared at Snape. It was surely one thing to respect the Dark Arts as a dangerous enemy, another to speak of them, as Snape was doing, with a loving caress in his voice?

“Your defenses,” said Snape, a little louder, “must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the arts you seek to undo. These pictures” — he indicated a few of them as he swept past — “give a fair representation of what happens to those who suffer, for instance, the Cruciatus Curse” — he waved a hand toward a witch who was clearly shrieking in agony — “feel the Dementor’s Kiss” — a wizard lying huddled and blank-eyed, slumped against a wall — “or provoke the aggression of the Inferius” — a bloody mass upon the ground.

“Has an Inferius been seen, then?” said Parvati Patil in a high-pitched voice. “Is it definite, is he using them?”

“The Dark Lord has used Inferi in the past,” said Snape, “which means you would be well-advised to assume he might use them again. Now . . .”

He set off again around the other side of the classroom toward his desk, and again, they watched him as he walked, his dark robes billowing behind him.

“ . . . you are, I believe, complete novices in the use of nonverbal spells. What is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?”

Hermione’s hand shot into the air. Snape took his time looking around at everybody else, making sure he had no choice, before saying curtly, “Very well — Miss Granger?”

“Your adversary has no warning about what kind of magic you’re about to perform,” said Hermione, “which gives you a split-second advantage.”

“An answer copied almost word for word from *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Six*,” said Snape dismissively (over in the corner, Malfoy sniggered), “but correct in essentials. Yes, those who progress to using magic without shouting incantations gain an element of surprise in their spell-casting. Not all wizards can do this, of course; it is a question of concentration and mind power which some” — his gaze lingered maliciously upon Harry once more — “lack.”

Harry knew Snape was thinking of their disastrous Occlumency lessons of the previous year. He refused to drop his gaze, but glowered at Snape until Snape looked away.

“You will now divide,” Snape went on, “into pairs. One partner will attempt to jinx the other *without speaking*. The other will

attempt to repel the jinx *in equal silence*. Carry on.”

Although Snape did not know it, Harry had taught at least half the class (everyone who had been a member of the D.A.) how to perform a Shield Charm the previous year. None of them had ever cast the charm without speaking, however. A reasonable amount of cheating ensued; many people were merely whispering the incantation instead of saying it aloud. Typically, ten minutes into the lesson Hermione managed to repel Neville’s muttered Jelly-Legs Jinx without uttering a single word, a feat that would surely have earned her twenty points for Gryffindor from any reasonable teacher, thought Harry bitterly, but which Snape ignored. He swept between them as they practiced, looking just as much like an overgrown bat as ever, lingering to watch Harry and Ron struggling with the task.

Ron, who was supposed to be jinxing Harry, was purple in the face, his lips tightly compressed to save himself from the temptation of muttering the incantation. Harry had his wand raised, waiting on tenterhooks to repel a jinx that seemed unlikely ever to come.

“Pathetic, Weasley,” said Snape, after a while. “Here — let me show you —”

He turned his wand on Harry so fast that Harry reacted instinctively; all thought of nonverbal spells forgotten, he yelled, “*Protego!*”

His Shield Charm was so strong Snape was knocked off-balance and hit a desk. The whole class had looked around and now watched as Snape righted himself, scowling.

“Do you remember me telling you we are practicing *nonverbal* spells, Potter?”

“Yes,” said Harry stiffly.

“Yes, *sir*.”

“There’s no need to call me ‘sir,’ Professor.”

The words had escaped him before he knew what he was saying. Several people gasped, including Hermione. Behind Snape, however, Ron, Dean, and Seamus grinned appreciatively.

“Detention, Saturday night, my office,” said Snape. “I do not take cheek from anyone, Potter . . . not even *‘the Chosen One.’*”

“That was brilliant, Harry!” chortled Ron, once they were safely on their way to break a short while later.

“You really shouldn’t have said it,” said Hermione, frowning at Ron. “What made you?”

“He tried to jinx me, in case you didn’t notice!” fumed Harry. “I had enough of that during those Occlumency lessons! Why doesn’t he use another guinea pig for a change? What’s Dumbledore playing at, anyway, letting him teach Defense? Did you hear him talking about the Dark Arts? He loves them! All that *unfixed, indestructible* stuff —”

“Well,” said Hermione, “I thought he sounded a bit like you.”

“Like *me*?”

“Yes, when you were telling us what it’s like to face Voldemort. You said it wasn’t just memorizing a bunch of spells, you said it was just you and your brains and your guts — well, wasn’t that what Snape was saying? That it really comes down to being brave and quick-thinking?”

Harry was so disarmed that she had thought his words as well worth memorizing as *The Standard Book of Spells* that he did not

argue.

“Harry! Hey, Harry!”

Harry looked around; Jack Sloper, one of the Beaters on last year’s Gryffindor Quidditch team, was hurrying toward him holding a roll of parchment.

“For you,” panted Sloper. “Listen, I heard you’re the new Captain. When’re you holding trials?”

“I’m not sure yet,” said Harry, thinking privately that Sloper would be very lucky to get back on the team. “I’ll let you know.”

“Oh, right. I was hoping it’d be this weekend —”

But Harry was not listening; he had just recognized the thin, slanting writing on the parchment. Leaving Sloper in mid-sentence, he hurried away with Ron and Hermione, unrolling the parchment as he went.

Dear Harry,

I would like to start our private lessons this Saturday. Kindly come along to my office at 8 p.m. I hope you are enjoying your first day back at school.

Yours sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

P.S. I enjoy Acid Pops.

“He enjoys Acid Pops?” said Ron, who had read the message over Harry’s shoulder and was looking perplexed.

“It’s the password to get past the gargoyle outside his study,” said Harry in a low voice. “Ha! Snape’s not going to be pleased. . . . I

won't be able to do his detention!"

He, Ron, and Hermione spent the whole of break speculating on what Dumbledore would teach Harry. Ron thought it most likely to be spectacular jinxes and hexes of the type the Death Eaters would not know. Hermione said such things were illegal, and thought it much more likely that Dumbledore wanted to teach Harry advanced Defensive magic. After break, she went off to Arithmancy while Harry and Ron returned to the common room, where they grudgingly started Snape's homework. This turned out to be so complex that they still had not finished when Hermione joined them for their after-lunch free period (though she considerably speeded up the process). They had only just finished when the bell rang for the afternoon's double Potions and they beat the familiar path down to the dungeon classroom that had, for so long, been Snape's.

When they arrived in the corridor they saw that there were only a dozen people progressing to N.E.W.T. level. Crabbe and Goyle had evidently failed to achieve the required O.W.L. grade, but four Slytherins had made it through, including Malfoy. Four Ravenclaws were there, and one Hufflepuff, Ernie Macmillan, whom Harry liked despite his rather pompous manner.

"Harry," Ernie said portentously, holding out his hand as Harry approached, "didn't get a chance to speak in Defense Against the Dark Arts this morning. Good lesson, I thought, but Shield Charms are old hat, of course, for us old D.A. lags . . . And how are you, Ron — Hermione?"

Before they could say more than "fine," the dungeon door opened and Slughorn's belly preceded him out of the door. As they filed into

the room, his great walrus mustache curved above his beaming mouth, and he greeted Harry and Zabini with particular enthusiasm.

The dungeon was, most unusually, already full of vapors and odd smells. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sniffed interestedly as they passed large, bubbling cauldrons. The four Slytherins took a table together, as did the four Ravenclaws. This left Harry, Ron, and Hermione to share a table with Ernie. They chose the one nearest a gold-colored cauldron that was emitting one of the most seductive scents Harry had ever inhaled: Somehow it reminded him simultaneously of treacle tart, the woody smell of a broomstick handle, and something flowery he thought he might have smelled at the Burrow. He found that he was breathing very slowly and deeply and that the potion's fumes seemed to be filling him up like drink. A great contentment stole over him; he grinned across at Ron, who grinned back lazily.

"Now then, now then, now then," said Slughorn, whose massive outline was quivering through the many shimmering vapors. "Scales out, everyone, and potion kits, and don't forget your copies of *Advanced Potion-Making*. . . ."

"Sir?" said Harry, raising his hand.

"Harry, m'boy?"

"I haven't got a book or scales or anything — nor's Ron — we didn't realize we'd be able to do the N.E.W.T., you see —"

"Ah, yes, Professor McGonagall did mention . . . not to worry, my dear boy, not to worry at all. You can use ingredients from the store cupboard today, and I'm sure we can lend you some scales, and we've got a small stock of old books here, they'll do until you can write to Flourish and Blotts. . . ."

Slughorn strode over to a corner cupboard and, after a moment's foraging, emerged with two very battered-looking copies of *Advanced Potion-Making* by Libatius Borage, which he gave to Harry and Ron along with two sets of tarnished scales.

"Now then," said Slughorn, returning to the front of the class and inflating his already bulging chest so that the buttons on his waistcoat threatened to burst off, "I've prepared a few potions for you to have a look at, just out of interest, you know. These are the kind of thing you ought to be able to make after completing your N.E.W.T.s. You ought to have heard of 'em, even if you haven't made 'em yet. Anyone tell me what this one is?"

He indicated the cauldron nearest the Slytherin table. Harry raised himself slightly in his seat and saw what looked like plain water boiling away inside it.

Hermione's well-practiced hand hit the air before anybody else's; Slughorn pointed at her.

"It's Veritaserum, a colorless, odorless potion that forces the drinker to tell the truth," said Hermione.

"Very good, very good!" said Slughorn happily. "Now," he continued, pointing at the cauldron nearest the Ravenclaw table, "this one here is pretty well known. . . . Featured in a few Ministry leaflets lately too . . . Who can — ?"

Hermione's hand was fastest once more.

"It's Polyjuice Potion, sir," she said.

Harry too had recognized the slow-bubbling, mudlike substance in the second cauldron, but did not resent Hermione getting the credit for answering the question; she, after all, was the one who had

succeeded in making it, back in their second year.

“Excellent, excellent! Now, this one here . . . yes, my dear?” said Slughorn, now looking slightly bemused, as Hermione’s hand punched the air again.

“It’s Amortentia!”

“It is indeed. It seems almost foolish to ask,” said Slughorn, who was looking mightily impressed, “but I assume you know what it does?”

“It’s the most powerful love potion in the world!” said Hermione.

“Quite right! You recognized it, I suppose, by its distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen?”

“And the steam rising in characteristic spirals,” said Hermione enthusiastically, “and it’s supposed to smell differently to each of us, according to what attracts us, and I can smell freshly mown grass and new parchment and —”

But she turned slightly pink and did not complete the sentence.

“May I ask your name, my dear?” said Slughorn, ignoring Hermione’s embarrassment.

“Hermione Granger, sir.”

“Granger? Granger? Can you possibly be related to Hector Dagworth-Granger, who founded the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers?”

“No, I don’t think so, sir. I’m Muggle-born, you see.”

Harry saw Malfoy lean close to Nott and whisper something; both of them sniggered, but Slughorn showed no dismay; on the contrary, he beamed and looked from Hermione to Harry, who was sitting next to her.

“Oho! *‘One of my best friends is Muggle-born, and she’s the best in our year!’* I’m assuming this is the very friend of whom you spoke, Harry?”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry.

“Well, well, take twenty well-earned points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger,” said Slughorn genially.

Malfoy looked rather as he had done the time Hermione had punched him in the face. Hermione turned to Harry with a radiant expression and whispered, “Did you really tell him I’m the best in the year? Oh, Harry!”

“Well, what’s so impressive about that?” whispered Ron, who for some reason looked annoyed. “You *are* the best in the year — I’d’ve told him so if he’d asked me!”

Hermione smiled but made a “shhing” gesture, so that they could hear what Slughorn was saying. Ron looked slightly disgruntled.

“Amortentia doesn’t really create *love*, of course. It is impossible to manufacture or imitate love. No, this will simply cause a powerful infatuation or obsession. It is probably the most dangerous and powerful potion in this room — oh yes,” he said, nodding gravely at Malfoy and Nott, both of whom were smirking skeptically. “When you have seen as much of life as I have, you will not underestimate the power of obsessive love. . . .

“And now,” said Slughorn, “it is time for us to start work.”

“Sir, you haven’t told us what’s in this one,” said Ernie Macmillan, pointing at a small black cauldron standing on Slughorn’s desk. The potion within was splashing about merrily; it was the color of molten gold, and large drops were leaping like goldfish above the

surface, though not a particle had spilled.

“Oho,” said Slughorn again. Harry was sure that Slughorn had not forgotten the potion at all, but had waited to be asked for dramatic effect. “Yes. That. Well, *that* one, ladies and gentlemen, is a most curious little potion called Felix Felicis. I take it,” he turned, smiling, to look at Hermione, who had let out an audible gasp, “that you know what Felix Felicis does, Miss Granger?”

“It’s liquid luck,” said Hermione excitedly. “It makes you lucky!”

The whole class seemed to sit up a little straighter. Now all Harry could see of Malfoy was the back of his sleek blond head, because he was at last giving Slughorn his full and undivided attention.

“Quite right, take another ten points for Gryffindor. Yes, it’s a funny little potion, Felix Felicis,” said Slughorn. “Desperately tricky to make, and disastrous to get wrong. However, if brewed correctly, as this has been, you will find that all your endeavors tend to succeed . . . at least until the effects wear off.”

“Why don’t people drink it all the time, sir?” said Terry Boot eagerly.

“Because if taken in excess, it causes giddiness, recklessness, and dangerous overconfidence,” said Slughorn. “Too much of a good thing, you know . . . highly toxic in large quantities. But taken sparingly, and very occasionally . . .”

“Have you ever taken it, sir?” asked Michael Corner with great interest.

“Twice in my life,” said Slughorn. “Once when I was twenty-four, once when I was fifty-seven. Two tablespoonfuls taken with breakfast. Two perfect days.”

He gazed dreamily into the distance. Whether he was playacting or not, thought Harry, the effect was good.

“And that,” said Slughorn, apparently coming back to earth, “is what I shall be offering as a prize in this lesson.”

There was silence in which every bubble and gurgle of the surrounding potions seemed magnified tenfold.

“One tiny bottle of Felix Felicis,” said Slughorn, taking a minuscule glass bottle with a cork in it out of his pocket and showing it to them all. “Enough for twelve hours’ luck. From dawn till dusk, you will be lucky in everything you attempt.

“Now, I must give you warning that Felix Felicis is a banned substance in organized competitions . . . sporting events, for instance, examinations, or elections. So the winner is to use it on an ordinary day only . . . and watch how that ordinary day becomes extraordinary!

“So,” said Slughorn, suddenly brisk, “how are you to win my fabulous prize? Well, by turning to page ten of *Advanced Potion-Making*. We have a little over an hour left to us, which should be time for you to make a decent attempt at the Draught of Living Death. I know it is more complex than anything you have attempted before, and I do not expect a perfect potion from anybody. The person who does best, however, will win little Felix here. Off you go!”

There was a scraping as everyone drew their cauldrons toward them and some loud clunks as people began adding weights to their scales, but nobody spoke. The concentration within the room was almost tangible. Harry saw Malfoy riffling feverishly through his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. It could not have been clearer that

Malfoy really wanted that lucky day. Harry bent swiftly over the tattered book Slughorn had lent him.

To his annoyance he saw that the previous owner had scribbled all over the pages, so that the margins were as black as the printed portions. Bending low to decipher the ingredients (even here, the previous owner had made annotations and crossed things out) Harry hurried off toward the store cupboard to find what he needed. As he dashed back to his cauldron, he saw Malfoy cutting up valerian roots as fast as he could.

Everyone kept glancing around at what the rest of the class was doing; this was both an advantage and a disadvantage of Potions, that it was hard to keep your work private. Within ten minutes, the whole place was full of bluish steam. Hermione, of course, seemed to have progressed furthest. Her potion already resembled the “smooth, black currant-colored liquid” mentioned as the ideal halfway stage.

Having finished chopping his roots, Harry bent low over his book again. It was really very irritating, having to try and decipher the directions under all the stupid scribbles of the previous owner, who for some reason had taken issue with the order to cut up the soporiferous bean and had written in the alternative instruction:

Crush with flat side of silver dagger, releases juice better than cutting.

“Sir, I think you knew my grandfather, Abraxas Malfoy?”

Harry looked up; Slughorn was just passing the Slytherin table.

“Yes,” said Slughorn, without looking at Malfoy, “I was sorry to hear he had died, although of course it wasn’t unexpected, dragon

pox at his age. . . .”

And he walked away. Harry bent back over his cauldron, smirking. He could tell that Malfoy had expected to be treated like Harry or Zabini; perhaps even hoped for some preferential treatment of the type he had learned to expect from Snape. It looked as though Malfoy would have to rely on nothing but talent to win the bottle of Felix Felicis.

The soporiferous bean was proving very difficult to cut up. Harry turned to Hermione.

“Can I borrow your silver knife?”

She nodded impatiently, not taking her eyes off her potion, which was still deep purple, though according to the book ought to be turning a light shade of lilac by now.

Harry crushed his bean with the flat side of the dagger. To his astonishment, it immediately exuded so much juice he was amazed the shriveled bean could have held it all. Hastily scooping it all into the cauldron he saw, to his surprise, that the potion immediately turned exactly the shade of lilac described by the textbook.

His annoyance with the previous owner vanishing on the spot, Harry now squinted at the next line of instructions. According to the book, he had to stir counterclockwise until the potion turned clear as water. According to the addition the previous owner had made, however, he ought to add a clockwise stir after every seventh counterclockwise stir. Could the old owner be right twice?

Harry stirred counterclockwise, held his breath, and stirred once clockwise. The effect was immediate. The potion turned palest pink.

“How are you doing that?” demanded Hermione, who was red-

facéd and whose hair was growing bushier and bushier in the fumes from her cauldron; her potion was still resolutely purple.

“Add a clockwise stir —”

“No, no, the book says counterclockwise!” she snapped.

Harry shrugged and continued what he was doing. Seven stirs counterclockwise, one clockwise, pause . . . seven stirs counterclockwise, one stir clockwise . . .

Across the table, Ron was cursing fluently under his breath; his potion looked like liquid licorice. Harry glanced around. As far as he could see, no one else’s potion had turned as pale as his. He felt elated, something that had certainly never happened before in this dungeon.

“And time’s . . . up!” called Slughorn. “Stop stirring, please!”

Slughorn moved slowly among the tables, peering into cauldrons. He made no comment, but occasionally gave the potions a stir or a sniff. At last he reached the table where Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ernie were sitting. He smiled ruefully at the tarlike substance in Ron’s cauldron. He passed over Ernie’s navy concoction. Hermione’s potion he gave an approving nod. Then he saw Harry’s, and a look of incredulous delight spread over his face.

“The clear winner!” he cried to the dungeon. “Excellent, excellent, Harry! Good lord, it’s clear you’ve inherited your mother’s talent. She was a dab hand at Potions, Lily was! Here you are, then, here you are — one bottle of Felix Felicis, as promised, and use it well!”

Harry slipped the tiny bottle of golden liquid into his inner pocket, feeling an odd combination of delight at the furious looks on the Slytherins’ faces and guilt at the disappointed expression on

Hermione's. Ron looked simply dumbfounded.

"How did you do that?" he whispered to Harry as they left the dungeon.

"Got lucky, I suppose," said Harry, because Malfoy was within earshot.

Once they were securely ensconced at the Gryffindor table for dinner, however, he felt safe enough to tell them. Hermione's face became stonier with every word he uttered.

"I s'pose you think I cheated?" he finished, aggravated by her expression.

"Well, it wasn't exactly your own work, was it?" she said stiffly.

"He only followed different instructions to ours," said Ron. "Could've been a catastrophe, couldn't it? But he took a risk and it paid off." He heaved a sigh. "Slughorn could've handed me that book, but no, I get the one no one's ever written on. *Puked* on, by the look of page fifty-two, but —"

"Hang on," said a voice close by Harry's left ear and he caught a sudden waft of that flowery smell he had picked up in Slughorn's dungeon. He looked around and saw that Ginny had joined them. "Did I hear right? You've been taking orders from something someone wrote in a book, Harry?"

She looked alarmed and angry. Harry knew what was on her mind at once.

"It's nothing," he said reassuringly, lowering his voice. "It's not like, you know, Riddle's diary. It's just an old textbook someone's scribbled on."

"But you're doing what it says?"

“I just tried a few of the tips written in the margins, honestly, Ginny, there’s nothing funny —”

“Ginny’s got a point,” said Hermione, perking up at once. “We ought to check that there’s nothing odd about it. I mean, all these funny instructions, who knows?”

“Hey!” said Harry indignantly, as she pulled his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* out of his bag and raised her wand.

“*Specialis Revelio!*” she said, rapping it smartly on the front cover.

Nothing whatsoever happened. The book simply lay there, looking old and dirty and dog-eared.

“Finished?” said Harry irritably. “Or d’you want to wait and see if it does a few backflips?”

“It seems all right,” said Hermione, still staring at the book suspiciously. “I mean, it really does seem to be . . . just a textbook.”

“Good. Then I’ll have it back,” said Harry, snatching it off the table, but it slipped from his hand and landed open on the floor.

Nobody else was looking. Harry bent low to retrieve the book, and as he did so, he saw something scribbled along the bottom of the back cover in the same small, cramped handwriting as the instructions that had won him his bottle of Felix Felicis, now safely hidden inside a pair of socks in his trunk upstairs.

This Book is the Property of the Half-Blood Prince.

Die Halfbloed Prins

Harry en Ron ontmoet Hermione die volgende oggend voor ontbyt in die geselskamer. Hopende dat hy ondersteuning vir sy teorie sal kry, vertel Harry dadelik vir Hermione wat hy Malfoy in die Hogwarts Express hoor sê het.

“Maar hy’t natuurlik net vir Parkinson probeer beïndruk,” kondig Ron aan voor Hermione enigiets kan sê.

“Wel,” sê sy onseker, “ek weet nie ... Dis tipies Malfoy om homself belangriker te laat klink as wat hy is ... maar dis ’n groot leuen om te vertel ...”

“Presies,” sê Harry, maar hy kan nie verder aangaan nie, want te veel mense probeer na hul gesprek luister, om nie te praat van hoe hulle hom aangaap en agter hul hande fluister nie.

“Dis ongeskik om so met jou vinger na iemand te wys,” sê Ron vir ’n besonder klein eerstejaartjie terwyl hulle in die ry staan om deur die portretopening te klim. Die seun, wat agter sy hand vir sy maat iets van Harry gefluister het, word rooi in die gesig en tuimel van skaamte by die opening uit. Ron grinnik.

“Ek’s mal daaroor om ’n sesdejaar te wees. En ons gaan vanjaar vrye tyd kry. Dan kan ons vir ’n hele periode net hier bo kom sit en niks doen.”

“Ons gaan daardie tyd nodig hê om te studeer, Ron!” sê Hermione terwyl hulle in die gang begin af loop.

“Ja, maar nie vandag nie,” sê Ron. “Ek sê ons gaan vandag net rondhang.”

“Haai, jy!” sê Hermione; sy steek een arm uit en stop ’n vierdejaar wat met ’n lemmetjiegroen skyf styf in sy hand verbystap. “Vreetfrisbees is verbode; gee dit hier,” sê sy streng vir hom. Die seun gee die frisbee wat tande wys teësinig vir haar, duik onderdeur Hermione se arm en verdwyn dan tussen sy maats. Ron wag tot hy weg is en gryp die frisbee by Hermione.

“Uitstekend. Ek wou nog altyd een van dié gehad het.”

Hermione se besware word deur ’n harde gegiggel verdryf;

Lavender Brown dink blykbaar Ron se opmerking was vreeslik snaaks. Sy hou aan lag terwyl sy verby hulle loop en kyk oor haar skouer terug na Ron. Ron lyk nogal tevrede met homself.

Die Groot Saal se plafon is helderblou met yl wolkslierte, net soos die blokkies lug wat deur die hoë vensters sigbaar is. Terwyl hulle aan hul pap en eiers en spek weglê, vertel Harry en Ron vir Hermione van hul ongemaklike gesprek met Hagrid die vorige aand.

“Maar hy kan tog sekerlik nie dink ons wil met Versorging van Magiese Kreature aangaan nie!” sê sy ontsteld. “Ek bedoel, wanneer was enigeen van ons enigins ... weet julle ... entoesiasies daaroor?”

“Dis juis die probleem,” sê Ron en sluk ’n gebakte eier heel in. “Ons was die ouens wat die meeste moeite in sy klasse gedoen het omdat ons van Hagrid hou. Nou dink hy ons hou van die simpel vak. Dink julle enigiemand gaan dit vir hul OTT doen?”

Nie Harry of Hermione antwoord nie; hulle hoef ook nie. Hulle weet ewe goed niemand in hul jaar sal met Versorging van Magiese Kreature wil aangaan nie. Hulle vermy Hagrid se oë en beantwoord sy vrolike gewaai net halfhartig toe hy die personeeltafel tien minute later verlaat.

Ná hulle geëet het, bly hulle op hul plekke en wag dat professor McGonagall by hulle aansluit. Die uitdeel van roosters is vanjaar meer ingewikkeld as gewoonlik, want professor McGonagall moet eers bevestig dat almal die nodige UIL-simbole behaal het om met hul gekose OTTe aan te gaan.

Hermione kry sonder versuim toestemming om met Towerspreuke, Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste, Transfigurasie, Kruiekunde, Rekenmatiek, Antieke Runes en Towerdrankies aan te gaan en sy kry dadelik koers na haar eerste Antieke Runes-klas. Dit neem effens langer om Neville uit te sorteer; sy ronde gesig lyk angstig terwyl professor McGonagall sy aansoek deurlees en dan sy UIL-uitslae raadpleeg.

“Kruiekunde is goed,” sê sy. “Professor Sprout sal verheug wees om jou terug te hê nadat jy ’n Uitstekend in jou UIL behaal het. En jy kwalifiseer vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste met ’n Oortref Verwagtinge. Maar die probleem is Transfigurasie. Ek is jammer, Longbottom, maar ’n Aanvaarbaar is regtig nie goed genoeg om op OTT-vlak daarmee aan te gaan nie. Ek dink nie jy sal opgewasse wees vir die leerplan nie.”

Neville se kop hang. Professor McGonagall kyk na hom deur haar vierkantige brilglase.

“Hoekom wil jy in elk geval met Transfigurasie aangaan? Ek het nooit die indruk gekry dat jy dit juis geniet nie.”

Neville lyk ongelukkig en mompel iets van: “My ouma wil hê ek moet dit doen.”

“Gmf,” snork professor McGonagall. “Dis hoog tyd dat jou ouma leer om trots te wees op die kleinseun wat sy het, in plaas van die een wat sy dink sy wil hê – veral ná wat by die Ministerie gebeur het.”

Neville raak baie pienk in die gesig en knip sy oë verward; professor McGonagall het nog nooit vantevore vir hom ’n kompliment gegee nie.

“Ek is jammer, Longbottom, maar ek kan jou nie tot my OTT-klas toelaat nie. Maar ek sien hier jy het ’n Oortref Verwagtinge vir Towerspreuke gekry – hoekom probeer jy nie ’n OTT in Towerspreuke kry nie?”

“My ouma dink Towerspreuke is té ’n maklike opsie,” brom Neville.

“Neem Towerspreuke,” sê professor McGonagall, “en ek sal vir Augusta skryf en haar daaraan herinner aan dat die blote feit dat sy haar Towerspreuke op UIL-vlak gedruip het nie noodwendig beteken dit is ’n nuttelose vak nie.” Met ’n skalkse glimlag oor die uitdrukking van oorstelpte ongeloof op Neville se gesig, tik professor McGonagall met die punt van haar towerstaf op ’n leë rooster en gee dit dan vir Neville met volledige besonderhede oor sy nuwe klasse.

Professor McGonagall draai volgende na Parvati Patil, wie se eerste vraag is of Firenze, die aantreklike sentaur, nog steeds Voorspellings gee.

“Hy en professor Trelawney gaan die klasse vanjaar tussen hulle verdeel,” sê professor McGonagall met ’n suggestie van afkeer in haar stem; dit is algemeen bekend dat sy die vak Voorspellings verafsku. “Professor Trelawney bied die sesdejaarkklasse aan.”

Parvati loop vyf minute later taamlik afgehaal na haar eerste Voorspellingsklas.

“Nou jy, Potter ...” sê professor McGonagall en raadpleeg haar notas terwyl sy na Harry draai. “Towerspreuke, Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste, Kruiekunde, Transfigurasie ... almal in die haak. Ek moet sê, ek was ingenome met jou simbool vir Transfigurasie, Potter, baie ingenome. Maar hoekom het jy nie aansoek gedoen om met Towerdrankies voort te gaan nie? Ek dag dan dit is jou droom om ’n Auror te word?”

“Dit was, maar u het vir my gesê ek moet dan ’n Uitstekend in my UIL kry, professor.”

“Dit was die geval toe professor Snape die vak gegee het. Professor Slughorn is egter heeltemal bereid om studente wat ’n Oortref

Verwagtinge op UIL-vlak behaal het tot sy OTT-klas toe te laat. Wil jy dus met Towerdrankies voortgaan?"

"Ja," sê Harry, "maar ek het nie die boeke of bestanddele of enigiets gekoop nie –"

"Ek is seker professor Slughorn sal so gaaf wees om vir jou die nodige te leen," sê professor McGonagall. "Goed dan, Potter; hier is jou rooster. O, terloops – twintig aspirante het alreeds hul name vir Gryffindor se Kwiddiek-span ingegee. Ek sal die lys mettertyd vir jou gee sodat jy die proewe kan reël."

'n Paar minute later kry Ron toestemming om dieselfde vakke as Harry te doen en hulle verlaat saam die tafel.

"Kyk," sê Ron opgewonde en staar na sy rooster, "ons het nou 'n af-periode ... en nog 'n af-periode ná pouse ... en ná middagete ... *Uitstekend!*"

Hulle gaan terug na die geselskamer wat nou leeg is afgesien van 'n halfdosyn sewendejaars, onder wie Katie Bell, die enigste oorblywende lid van die oorspronklike Gryffindor Kwiddiek-span waarvoor Harry in sy eerste jaar begin speel het.

"Mooi so. Ek het gedink jy sal dit kry," roep sy uit en wys na die kapteinwapen op Harry se bors. "Laat weet my maar wanneer die proewe is!"

"Moenie simpel wees nie," sê Harry "Vergeet van die proewe; ek sien jou al vir vyf jaar speel ..."

"Jy moenie só wegspring nie," waarsku sy. "Vir al wat jy weet, is daar iemand wat baie beter as ek is. Goeie spanne het al sleg verloor omdat kapteins net die ou gesigte of hul vriende in die span gesit het ..."

Ron lyk ietwat ongemaklik en begin speel met die Vreetfrisbee wat Hermione by die vierdejaar afgeneem het. Die ding zoem in die geselskamer rond, grom en probeer happe uit die tapisserieë vat. Kromskeen se geel oë volg hom en hy blaas wanneer die frisbee te naby aan hom kom.

'n Uur later verlaat hulle die sonnige geselskamer onwillig en loop na die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-klaskamer vier verdiepings ondertoe. Hermione staan alreeds buitekant in die ry; sy dra 'n arm vol swaar boeke en lyk veronreg.

"Ons het soveel huiswerk vir Runes gekry," sê sy ontsteld toe Harry en Ron by haar aansluit. "'n Vyftienduimopstel, twee vertalings, en ek moet dit alles voor Woensdag lees!"

"Foeitog," gaap Ron.

"Wag maar," sê sy gebelg, "ek wed jou Snape gaan vir ons hope huiswerk gee." Terwyl sy praat, gaan die klaskamer se deur oop en

Snape betree die gang met sy sieklike geel gesig wat soos altyd deur twee gordyne olierige swart hare omraam word. Almal in die ry bly onmiddellik stil.

“In is julle,” sê hy. Harry kyk rond terwyl hulle instap. Snape het sy stempel reeds op die vertrek afgedruk; dit lyk somberder as gewoonlik, want die gordyne voor die vensters is toegetrek en daar brand net kerse. Teen die mure hang daar nuwe prente, baie van mense wat lyk of hulle in pyn verkeer, met grillerige beserings of liggaamsdele wat vreemd verwring is. Niemand praat terwyl hulle gaan sit nie; almal verkyk hulle aan die donker, grusame prente.

“Ek het nie gevra julle moet julle boeke uithaal nie,” sê Snape terwyl hy die deur toemaak en agter sy lessenaar inbeweeg sodat hy die klas kan sien. Hermione sit haar eksemplaar van *Konfronteer die Gesiglose* vinnig terug in die sak onder haar stoel. “Ek wil met julle praat en ek wil julle volle aandag hê.”

Sy swart oë dwaal oor die starende gesigte en talm ’n fraksie van ’n sekonde langer op Harry s’n as enigiemand anders s’n.

“Ek verstaan julle het tot dusver vyf onderwysers vir hierdie vak gehad.”

Jy verstaan ... Asof jy hulle almal nie sien kom en gaan het nie, Snape. Ek hoop jy’s volgende, dink Harry vol wrewel.

“Daardie onderwysers het vanselfsprekend hul eie metodes en prioriteite gehad. Gegewe die gevolglike verwarring is ek verbaas dat soveel van julle ’n UIL in hierdie vak behaal het. Ek sal selfs nog meer verbaas wees as julle almal gaan byhou met die OTT-werk, wat baie meer gevorderd is.”

Snape begin om die kant van die vertrek langs beweeg. Hy praat nou in ’n dieper stem en die klas rek hul nekke om hom te kan sien.

“Die Donker Kunste,” sê Snape, “is velerlei, gevarieerd, ewig wisselend en nimmereindigend. Om hulle te beveg, is soos om te baklei teen ’n monster met baie koppe; elke keer dat ’n kop afgekap word, kom daar ’n volgende een te voorskyn wat selfs nog meer verbete en uitgeslape is. Jy veg teen dit wat ongedefinieerd, muterend en onvernietigbaar is.”

Harry staar na Snape. Dis goed en wel om die Donker Kunste as ’n gevaarlike vyand te respekteer, maar iets anders kom soos Snape daaroor te praat in so ’n liefdevolle, strelende stemtoon.

“Jul verdediging,” sê Snape ’n tikkie harder, “moet daarom so aanpasbaar en vindingryk wees soos die Kunste wat julle ongedaan probeer maak. Hierdie prente,” en hy wys na ’n paar terwyl hy verbyswiep, “is ’n goeie aanduiding van wat gebeur met diegene wat

byvoorbeeld deur die Cruciatusvloek getref is” (hy beduie met sy hand na ’n heks wat duidelik gil van pyn), “wat ’n Dementor se Kus ervaar het” (’n towenaar lê in ’n houpie en met uitdrukkinglose oë teen ’n muur ineengesak) “of wat die aggressie van die Inferius ont-keten het” (’n bloederige massa op die grond).

“Is daar dan ’n Inferius gesien?” vra Parvati Patil in ’n hoë stem. “Is dit waar; gebruik hy dit?”

“Die Donker Heer het al in die verlede Inferi gebruik,” sê Snape, “wat beteken dit sal raadsaam wees om te aanvaar dat hy dit weer mag doen. Nou ja ...”

Hy begin met die ander kant van die klaskamer langs terug na sy lessenaar loop en die klas hou hom weer eens dop terwyl sy donker klee agter hom bol staan.

“... Julle is na my mening volslae beginners op die gebied van nieverbale towerspreuke. Wat is die voordeel van ’n nieverbale spreuk?”

Hermione se hand skiet in die lug op. Snape kyk eers tydsam in die klas rond om seker te maak hy het nie ’n ander keuse nie, en sê dan kortaf, “Ja, juffrou Granger?”

“Jou teenstander word nie gewaarsku watter toorkrag jy gaan gebruik nie,” sê Hermione, “wat jou ’n breukdeel van ’n sekonde se voordeel gee.”

“’n Antwoord wat bykans woord vir woord uit *Die Standaard Towerspreukboek, Graad 6* oorgeneem is,” sê Snape minagtend (Malfoy grinnik in die ander hoek van die klas), “maar dit is basies korrek. Inderdaad, diegene wat vorder tot op die vlak waar hulle toorkrag kan gebruik sonder om inkantasies uit te roep voeg ’n verrassingselement by hul towerspreuke. Alle towenaars is natuurlik nie hiertoe in staat nie; dit verg ’n peil van konsentrasie en breinkrag wat party,” sy blik rus weer hatig op Harry, “kortkom.”

Harry weet Snape dink aan hul rampspoedige Okklumensiellesse die vorige jaar. Hy weier egter om sy oë te laat sak en gluur Snape aan totdat hy wegkyk.

“Ons gaan nou in pare verdeel,” sê Snape verder. “Die een persoon gaan die ander een probeer toor *sonder om te praat*. Die ander persoon gaan die towerspreuk *ook in stilte* probeer afweer. Gaan voort.”

Hoewel Snape dit nie weet nie het Harry die vorige jaar vir minstens die helfte van die klas (almal wat DS-lede was) geleer hoe om ’n Skildspreuk te doen. Nie een van hulle het die towerspreuk egter nog ooit woordeloos uitgevoer nie. Baie van die studente kul; hulle fluister die inkantasie eenvoudig pleks van om dit hardop te sê.

Soos te wagte slaag Hermione tien minute ná die begin van die les daarin om Neville se gefluisterde Jelliebeenvloek af te weer sonder om 'n enkele woord te uiter; 'n prestasie waarvoor enige redelike onderwyser Gryffindor met twintig punte sou beloon het, dink Harry bitter, maar wat Snape ignoreer. Hy seil tussen hulle deur terwyl hulle oefen en lyk nog nes altyd soos 'n reusevlermuis wanneer hy talm om te kyk hoe Harry en Ron met die taak sukkel.

Ron, wat veronderstel is om Harry te toor, is pers in die gesig; sy lippe is styf saamgepers sodat hy nie in die versoeking moet kom om die inkantasie hardop te sê nie. Harry se towerstaf is gelig; hy wag in spanning om 'n towerspreuk wat lyk of dit nooit sal kom nie, af te weer.

“Pateties, Weasley,” sê Snape ná 'n rukkie. “Hier – laat ek jou wys hoe –”

Hy rig sy towerstaf so rats op Harry dat Harry instinktief reageer; enige gedagte aan nieverbale towerspreuke is totaal vergete en hy gil: “*Protego!*”

Sy Skildspreuk is so sterk dat dit Snape van balans af gooi en hy homself teen 'n lessenaar moet stut. Die hele klas kyk om en sien hoe Snape woedend regop kom.

“Onthou jy ek het gesê ons gaan *nieverbale* towerspreuke oefen, Potter?”

“Ja,” sê Harry stroef.

“Ja, *professor*.”

“Dis nie nodig om my ‘professor’ te noem nie, professor.”

Die woorde glip uit voor hy weet wat hy sê. Verskeie mense, onder andere Hermione, snak na asem. Maar agter Snape grinnik Ron, Dean en Seamus waarderend.

“Detensie, Saterdagavond, my kantoor,” sê Snape. “Ek duld nie astrantheid van enigiemand nie, Potter ... selfs nie van die *Uitverkorene* nie.”

“Dit was briljant, Harry!” grynslag Ron toe hulle 'n rukkie later veilig op pad uit is vir pouse.

“Jy moes dit nie gesê het nie,” sê Hermione, wat vir Ron frons. “Wat het jou besiel?”

“Het jy nie gesien hy probeer my toor nie?” vra Harry smoor-kwaad. “Ek het genoeg daarvan gehad met laas jaar se Okklumensie-lesse! Hoekom gebruik hy nie vir 'n verandering iemand anders as proefkonyn nie? Wat makeer Dumbledore in elk geval om toe te laat dat hy Verdediging gee? Het julle gehoor hoe praat hy van die Donker Kunste? Asof dit sy groot liefde is! Al daai praatjies van *ongedefinieerd* en *onvernietigbaar* –”

“Wel,” sê Hermione, “ek het gedink hy klink 'n bietjie soos jy.”

“Soos ek?”

“Ja, toe jy ons vertel het hoe dit gevoel het om Voldemort in die gesig te staar. Jy’t gesê dit help nie mens leer ’n spul towerspreuke nie; jy’t gesê dis net jy en jou brein en jou moed – wel, is dit nie wat Snape gesê het nie? Dat dit eintlik daarop neerkom dat mens dapper moet wees en vinnig moet dink?”

Harry is so uit die veld geslaan dat sy haar verwerdig om sy woorde net soos *Die Standaard Towerspreukboek* te memoriseer dat hy nie stry nie.

“Harry! Hei, Harry!”

Harry kyk om; Jack Sloper, een van die Mokers in laas jaar se Gryffindor Kwiddiek-span, kom haastig met ’n perkamentrol aangestap.

“Dis vir jou,” hyg Sloper. “Luister, ek hoor jy’s die nuwe kaptein. Wanneer is die proewe?”

“Ek is nog nie seker nie,” sê Harry en dink in sy enigheid dat Sloper baie gelukkig sal wees om weer die span te haal. “Ek sal jou laat weet.”

“O, reg. Ek het gehoop dis al dié naweek –”

Maar Harry luister nie; hy het so pas die dun, skuins handskrif op die perkament herken. Sloper praat nog, maar hy stap haastig saam met Ron en Hermione weg terwyl hy die perkament ooprol.

Liewe Harry

Ek wil graag hierdie Saterdag met ons privaat lesse begin. Kom asseblief agt namiddag na my kantoor. Ek hoop jy geniet jou eerste dag terug op skool.

Vriendelike groete,

Albus Dumbledore

NS Ek hou van Suurklontjies.

“Hy hou van Suurklontjies?” sê Ron, wat die boodskap oor Harry se skouer gelees het en verbyster lyk.

“Dis die wagwoord om verby die drakekop buite sy kantoor te kom,” sê Harry in ’n lae stem. “Ha! Snape gaan nie hiervan hou nie ... Ek sal nie sy detensie kan doen nie!”

Harry, Ron en Hermione spekuleer die res van pouse oor wat Dumbledore vir Harry wil leer. Ron dink dit gaan skouspelagtige doepas en paljasse wees wat die Doodseters nie ken nie. Hermione sê sulke dinge is onwettig en dink dit is baie waarskynliker dat Dumbledore vir Harry gevorderde verdedigende toorkunsies gaan leer. Ná pouse gaan sy Rekenmatiek toe terwyl Harry en Ron terugloop

na die geselskamer waar hulle onwillig met Snape se huiswerk begin. Dit is so ingewikkeld dat hulle nog steeds daarmee besig is toe Hermione ná middagete vir hul volgende af-periode by hulle aansluit (alhoewel sy die proses aansienlik verhaas). Hulle maak net mooi klaar toe die klok lui vir die middag se dubbelperiode Towerdrankies en stap met die bekende pad af na die kerkerklaskamer wat so lank Snape s'n was.

Hulle kom in die gang aan en sien daar is net 'n paar mense wat die vak op OTT-vlak gaan doen. Crabbe en Goyle het klaarblyklik nie die vereiste UIL-simbool behaal nie, maar vier Slytherins het dit gemaak, insluitende Malfoy. Daar is ook vier Raweklouers en een Hoesenproeser, Ernie Macmillan, van wie Harry hou, al is hy effens verwaand.

"Harry," sê Ernie plegtig en hou sy hand uit toe Harry nader kom. "ons het nie vanoggend in Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste kans gekry om te gesels nie. Ek het gedink dit was 'n goeie les, maar Skildspreuke is natuurlik vir ons geharde DS-lede niks nuuts nie ... En hoe gaan dit met julle, Ron – Hermione?"

Voor hulle meer as "goed" kan sê, gaan die kerker se deur oop en Slughorn se maag kom voor hom uit. Terwyl hulle by die vertrek instap, krul sy groot walrussnor op bo die breë glimlag waarmee hy Harry en Zabini besonder geesdrftig groet.

Die kerker is anders as gewoonlik reeds gevul met dampe en vreemde reuke. Harry, Ron en Hermione snuif belangstellend terwyl hulle verby die groot, borrelende heksetels loop. Die vier Slytherins gaan sit saam by 'n tafel, en so ook die vier Raweklouers. Dit beteken Harry, Ron en Hermione moet 'n tafel met Ernie deel. Hulle kies die een naaste aan die goudkleurige ketel waaruit daar van die onweerstaanbaarste geure kom wat Harry nog ooit ingeasem het; dit herinner hom tegelyk aan strooptert, die houtreuk van 'n besemstok se handvat en iets blommerigs wat hy hom verbeel hy al in Die Konynenes geruik het. Hy kom agter hy haal baie stadig en diep asem en dat die towerdrankie se dampe hom soos nektar vul. Daar daal 'n heerlike tevredenheid oor hom neer; hy grinnik vir Ron wat lui vir hom teruggrinnik.

"Toe nou, toe nou, toe nou," sê Slughorn, wie se massiewe buitelyn deur al die glinsterende dampe bewe. "Skale uit, almal, en towerdrankietoerusting, en moenie julle eksemplare van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* vergeet nie ..."

"Professor?" vra Harry en lig sy hand.

"Harry, ou seun?"

"Ek het nie 'n boek of skaal of enigiets nie – Ron ook nie – ons het nie besef ons sal tot die OTT toegelaat word nie –"

“A ja, professor McGonagall het dit genoem ... geen probleem nie, my liewe seun, absoluut geen probleem nie. Julle kan vandag bestanddele uit die stoorkas gebruik; ek is seker ons kan vir julle skale leen en ons het ’n klein voorraad ou boeke hier; hulle sal doen totdat julle vir Sierskrif en Klatt kan skryf ...”

Slughorn loop na ’n kas in die hoek, krap ’n oomblik daarin rond en kom dan vorendag met twee baie gehawende eksemplare van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* deur Libatius Borage, wat hy saam met twee aangeslaande skale vir Harry en Ron gee.

“Nou ja,” sê Slughorn en gaan staan weer voor in die klas terwyl hy sy reeds bultende borskas opblaas tot sy onderbaadjie se knope dreig om af te spring, “ek het ’n paar towerdrankies voorberei sodat julle daarna kan kyk, net interessantheidshalwe, weet julle. Julle behoort soortgelyke drankies te kan maak teen die tyd dat julle hierdie OTT voltooi het. Julle behoort al van hulle te gehoor het, selfs al het julle hulle nog nie gemaak nie. Kan enigiemand vir my sê wat hierdie een is?”

Hy wys na die ketel naaste aan die Slytherin-tafel. Harry lig homself effens uit sy stoel en sien iets wat soos gewone water lyk binne-in kook.

Hermione se goed geoefende hand vlieg voor enigiemand anders s’n in die lug op; Slughorn wys na haar.

“Dis Veritaserum, ’n kleurlose, geurlose towerdrankie wat die drinker verplig om die waarheid te vertel,” sê Hermione.

“Baie goed, baie goed!” sê Slughorn tevrede. “Nou ja,” gaan hy aan en wys na die ketel naaste aan die Raweklou-tafel, “hierdie een is taamlik goed bekend ... Dit word deesdae ook in ’n paar pamflette van die Ministerie genoem ... Wie kan –”

Hermione se hand is weer eens die vinnigste.

“Dis Polisouspaljas, professor,” sê sy.

Harry het die modderige mengsel wat so stadig in die tweede ketel prut ook herken, maar hy gee nie om dat Hermione krediet kry vir die feit dat sy die vraag beantwoord het nie; sy is na alles die een wat dit al in hul tweede jaar reggekry het om die paljas self te maak.

“Uitstekend, uitstekend! En nou hierdie een hier ... Ja, skatlam?” sê Slughorn en lyk nogal geamuseerd dat Hermione se hand al weer opskiet.

“Dis Amortentia!”

“Dit is inderdaad. Dis sekerlik ’n dom vraag,” sê Slughorn en lyk geweldig beïndruk, “maar ek neem aan jy weet wat dit doen?”

“Dis die sterkste liefdesdrankie ter wêreld!” sê Hermione.

“Heeltemal reg! Ek veronderstel jy het dit herken aan die eiesoortige perlemoenskynsel.”

“En die stoom wat in kenmerkende spirale opstyg,” sê Hermione entoesiasties, “en dis veronderstel om vir elkeen van ons verskillend te ruik, afhangende van waartoe ons aangetrokke voel. Ek ruik vars-gesnyde gras en nuwe perkament en –”

Maar sy word skielik effens pienk en voltooi nie die sin nie.

“Mag ek vra wat jou naam is, skatlam?” sê Slughorn en maak of hy nie sien hoe skaam Hermione is nie.

“Hermione Granger, professor.”

“Granger? Granger? Is jy dalk verwant aan Hector Dagworth-Granger, stigter van die Mees Buitengewone Vereniging van Towerdrankiemakers?”

“Ek dink nie so nie, professor. Sien u, ek is Moggel-gebore.”

Harry merk op hoe Malfoy na Nott toe oorleun en iets fluister; hulle spotlag al twee, maar Slughorn toon geen teken van ontsteltenis nie; intendeel, hy straal en kyk van Hermione na Harry wat langs haar sit.

“Oho! *‘Een van my beste vriende is van Moggel-afkoms en sy’s die beste student in ons jaar!’* Ek veronderstel dis die einste vriend van wie jy gepraat het, Harry?”

“Ja, professor,” sê Harry.

“Nou toe nou, twintig welverdiende punte vir Gryffindor, juffrou Granger,” sê Slughorn gemoedelik.

Malfoy lyk soos die keer toe Hermione hom met haar vuis in die gesig geslaan het. Hermione draai met ’n stralende uitdrukking na Harry en sê: “Het jy regtig vir hom gesê ek is die beste in ons jaar? O, Harry!”

“Wat is so besonders daaromtrent?” fluister Ron, wat om die een of ander rede vies lyk. “Jy is mos die beste in ons jaar – as hy my gevra het, sou ek dit ook vir hom gesê het!”

Hermione glimlag, maar maak ’n “sjoes”-gebaar sodat hulle kan hoor wat Slughorn sê. Ron lyk effens ontevrede.

“Amortentia skep natuurlik nie regtig *liefde* nie. Dis onmoontlik om liefde te maak of na te maak. Nee, hierdie drankie skep eenvoudig ’n verblindende verliefdheid of obsessie. Dit is moontlik die gevaarlikste en sterkste towerdrankie in hierdie vertrek – o ja,” sê hy en knik ernstig vir Malfoy en Nott wat albei skepties grys. “Wanneer jy al soveel soos ek van die lewe gesien het, sal jy nie die mag van obsessiewe liefde onderskat nie ...

“En nou,” sê Slughorn, “is dit tyd vir ons om te begin werk.”

“Professor het nog nie vir ons gesê wat in hierdie een is nie,” sê

Ernie Macmillan en wys na die klein swart heksekettel wat op Slughorn se lessenaar staan. Die towerdrankie daarin borrel vrolik; dit is die kleur van gesmelte goud en groot druppels spring soos goudvissies bo die oppervlak uit, maar nie 'n enkele een stort uit nie.

“Oho,” sê Slughorn weer. Harry is seker Slughorn het glad nie van die towerdrankie vergeet nie, maar gewag dat iemand hom daaroor uitvra ter wille van 'n dramatieser effek. “Ja. Dit. Wel, *daardie* een, dames en here, is 'n uiters koddige towerdrankie genaamd Felix Felicis. Ek neem aan,” en hy draai glimlaggend na Hermione wat hoorbaar snak, “jy weet wat 'n Felix Felicis doen, juffrou Granger?”

“Dis voorspoed in vloeistofvorm,” sê Hermione opgewonde. “Dit bring vir jou geluk!”

Die hele klas sit skielik 'n bietjie regopper. Al wat Harry nou van Malfoy kan sien, is die agterkant van sy gladde blonde kop, want hy gee uiteindelik sy volle en onverdeelde aandag aan Slughorn.

“Heeltemal reg. Nog tien punte vir Gryffindor. Ja, dis 'n vreemde towerdrankie, hierdie Felix Felicis,” sê Slughorn. “Ontsettend moeilik om te maak, en rampspoedig as jy dit verkeerd doen. Maar as dit reg gebrou word, soos hierdie een, sal jy agterkom al jou pogings is geneig om suksesvol te wees ... ten minste tot die uitwerking daarvan afneem.”

“Hoekom drink mense dit nie heeltyd nie, professor?” vra Terry Boot gretig.

“Want as jy dit in oormaat gebruik, maak dit jou lighoofdig, roekeloos en gevaarlik oormoedig,” sê Slughorn. “Te veel van 'n goeie ding, weet jy ... uiters giftig in groot hoeveelhede. Maar as dit spaarsamig en net nou en dan geneem word ...”

“Het professor dit al ooit gedrink?” vra Michael Corner baie geïnteresseerd.

“Twee keer in my lewe,” sê Slughorn. “Een keer toe ek vier-en-twintig was en een keer toe ek sewe-en-vyftig was. Twee teelepels vol saam met ontbyt. Twee perfekte dae.”

Hy tuur dromerig die verte in. Of hy nou toneelspeel of nie, dink Harry, dit werk.

“En dit,” sê Slughorn, wat weer terug aarde toe gekeer het, “is wat ek in hierdie les as prys gaan aanbied.”

Daar is 'n stilte wat elke borrel en prut van die omringende towerdrankies tien keer harder laat klink.

“Een botteltjie Felix Felicis,” sê Slughorn. Hy haal 'n piepklein botteltjie wat met 'n kurkprop verseël is uit sy sak en wys dit vir

almaal. “Genoeg vir twaalf uur van voorspoed. Van dagbreek tot skemer sal jy voorspoedig wees met alles wat jy aanpak.

“Ek moet julle egter waarsku – Felix Felicis is ’n verbode middel in georganiseerde kompetisies ... sportbyeenkomste byvoorbeeld, eksamens of verkiesings. Die wenner mag dit dus slegs op ’n gewone dag gebruik ... en wag en kyk hoe die gewone dag buitengewoon word!

“So,” sê Slughorn skielik haastig, “hoe gaan iemand my wonderlike prys wen? Deur te blaai na bladsy tien van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies*. Ons het net bietjie meer as ’n uur oor, wat julle genoeg tyd behoort te gee om ’n ordentlike poging aan te wend om die Drankie van Lewende Dood te meng. Ek weet dit is meer kompleks as enigiets wat julle tot dusver aangepak het en ek verwag nie ’n perfekte drankie van enigiemand nie. Die persoon wat die beste vaar, gaan egter hierdie botteltjie Felix wen. Aan die werk!”

Daar is ’n skuurgeluid soos almal hul ketels nader trek en ’n paar harde klinkgeluide soos mense gewigte op hul skale neersit, maar niemand praat nie. Die konsentrasie in die vertrek is amper tasbaar. Harry sien hoe koorsagtig Malfoy deur sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* blaai. Dit is duidelik dat Malfoy baie graag daardie gelukkige dag wil wen. Harry raadpleeg haastig die verslete boek wat Slughorn vir hom geleen het.

Tot sy ergernis sien hy die vorige eienaar het oral oor die bladsye geskryf sodat die kantlyne net so swart soos die gedrukte dele is. Harry moet mooi kyk om uit te maak wat die bestanddele is (selfs hier het die vorige eienaar aantekeninge gemaak en goed uitgekrap) en dan loop hy vinnig na die stoorkas toe om te kry wat hy nodig het. Hy haas hom terug na sy ketel en sien Malfoy kerf valeriaanwortels vir al wat hy werd is.

Almal loer aanhoudend om te sien wat die res van die klas doen; dit is een van die voor- én nadele van Towerdrankieklasse: Dit is moeilik om jou werk privaat te hou. Binne tien minute is die hele klas met ’n blouerige stoom gevul. Hermione vorder natuurlik oënskynlik die vinnigste. Haar towerdrankie begin al lyk soos die “gladde, swartbessiekleurige vloeistof” wat as die ideale tussenstadium beskryf word.

Harry het sy wortels klaar opgesny en buk weer laag oor sy boek af. Dit is regtig irriterend om die aanwysings te probeer ontsyfer tussen al die simpel gekrap van die vorige eienaar, wat nie saamgestem het met die feit dat die Sopoforeuse Boon opgekerf moet word nie en toe ’n alternatiewe instruksie ingevul het:

Druk fyn met die plat kant van ’n silwer dolk; laat sap beter vry as opkerf.

“Professor, ek dink u het my oupa, Abraxas Malfoy, geken.”

Harry kyk op; Slughorn is net besig om verby die Slytherin-tafel te loop.

“Ja,” sê Slughorn sonder om vir Malfoy te kyk, “ek was jammer om te hoor hy is oorlede, hoewel dit niemand natuurlik verbaas het nie; draakpökkies op sy ouderdom ...”

En hy loop weg. Harry buk weer oor sy ketel en grinnik. Hy weet Malfoy het verwag om soos hyself en Zabini behandel te word; miskien selfs gehoop hy sal voorkeurbehandeling kry soos by Snape. Maar dit lyk of Malfoy slegs op talent sal moet staatmaak om die bottel Felix Felicis te wen.

Dit is baie moeilik om die Sopoforeuse Boon op te kerf. Harry draai na Hermione toe.

“Kan ek jou silwer mes leen?”

Sy knik ongeduldig terwyl sy stip kyk na haar towerdrankie wat nog steeds dieppers is, al moes dit volgens die boek nou al ligpers geword het.

Harry druk sy boon met die plat kant van die mes fyn. Tot sy verstomming laat die verskrompelde boon dadelik meer sap vry as wat hy ooit kon dink dit sou bevat. Hy skep dit haastig in sy ketel en sien tot sy verbasing hoe verander die towerdrankie onmiddellik in die ligpers skakering wat in die teksboek beskryf word.

Harry is skielik nie meer geïrriteerd met die vorige eienaar nie en knip sy oë vinnig om die volgende reël aanwysings te lees. Volgens die boek moet hy antikloksgewys roer tot die towerdrankie so helder soos water word, maar volgens die vorige eienaar se byvoeging moet hy ná elke sewende antikloksgewyse roer een keer kloksgewys roer. Kan die gewese eienaar twee keer reg wees?

Harry roer antikloksgewys, hou asem op en roer dan een keer kloksgewys. Die effek is oombliklik. Die towerdrankie word 'n baie ligte pers.

“Hoe kry jy dit reg?” wil Hermione weet. Sy is rooi in die gesig en die dampe wat uit haar ketel kom, maak haar hare al kroeser; haar towerdrankie bly nog steeds vasberade pers.

“Roer een keer kloksgewys –”

“Nee, nee, die boek sê antikloksgewys!” snou sy hom toe.

Harry haal sy skouers op en gaan aan met wat hy doen. Sewe keer antikloksgewys roer, een keer kloksgewys, wag ... sewe keer antikloksgewys roer, een keer kloksgewys ...

Oorkant die tafel vloek Ron vlot onderlangs; sy towerdrankie lyk soos vloeibare drop. Harry kyk om. Sover hy kan sien, is niemand anders se towerdrankie so bleek soos syne nie. Hy is

verheug, iets wat hy beslis nog nooit voorheen in hierdie kelder gevoel het nie.

“En die tyd is ... verstreke!” roep Slughorn uit. “Hou asseblief op roer!”

Slughorn beweeg stadig tussen die tafels deur en loer in die ketels. Hy maak geen opmerkings nie, maar roer nou en dan ’n towerdrankie, of ruik daaraan. Hy kom uiteindelik by die tafel waar Harry, Ron, Hermione en Ernie sit. Hy glimlag meewarig vir die teeragtige mengsel in Ron se ketel. Hy loop verby Ernie se donkerblou konkoksie. Hermione se towerdrankie kry ’n goedkeurende knik. Dan sien hy Harry s’n en ’n uitdrukking van ongelooflike genoegdoening versprei oor sy gesig.

“Duidelik die wenner!” weergalm sy stem deur die kelder. “Uitstekend, uitstekend, Harry! Goeie hemel, jy het duidelik jou ma se talent geërf. Sy was ’n meester met Towerdrankies, onse Lily! Vat so, ou seun, vat so – ’n botteltjie Felix Felicis soos belowe – en wend dit goed aan!” Harry steek die botteltjie goue vloeistof in sy binnesak en ervaar ’n vreemde mengsel van genot oor die woedende kyk op die Slytherins se gesigte en skuldgevoel oor die teleurgestelde uitdrukking op Hermione s’n. Ron lyk eenvoudig net dronkgeslaan.

“Hoe’t jy dit reggekry?” fluister hy vir Harry toe hulle later by die kelder uitloop.

“Seker net blote geluk,” sê Harry, want Malfoy is binne hoorafstand.

Eers met aandete, toe hulle tussen hul eie mense aan die Gryffindor-tafel sit, voel hy dit is veilig genoeg om hulle te vertel. Hermione se gesig word strakker met elke woord wat hy uiter.

“Julle dink seker ek het gekul,” sluit hy af, vies oor haar gesigsuitdrukking.

“Wel, dit was nie eintlik jou eie werk nie, was dit?” vra sy stywenek.

“Hy het net ander instruksies as ons gevolg,” sê Ron. “Dit kon ’n ramp afgegee het. Maar hy’t die kans gevat en dit het gewerk.” Hy sug swaar. “Slughorn kon daai boek vir my gegee het, maar nee, ek kry die een waarin niemand ooit iets geskryf het nie. Net daarop gekots het, as jy na bladsy twee-en-vyftig kyk, maar –”

“Wag bietjie,” sê ’n stem naby Harry se linkeroor en hy kry skielik ’n vlagie van daardie blommerige geur wat hy in Slughorn se kelder gekry het. Hy kyk om en sien Ginny het by hulle aangesluit. “Het ek reg gehoor? Het jy iemand wat iets in ’n boek ingeskryf het se instruksies gevolg, Harry?”

Sy lyk ontsteld en kwaad. Harry weet dadelik wat sy dink.

“Dis niks nie,” paai hy en laat sak sy stem. “Dis nie soos, weet jy, Riddle se dagboek nie. Dis net ’n ou teksboek waarin iemand gekrap het.”

“Maar jy maak soos dit sê?”

“Ek het net ’n paar van die wenke gevolg; goed wat in die kantlyn geskryf is. Eerlik, Ginny; dis niks snaaks –”

“Ginny het ’n punt beet,” sê Hermione en kikker dadelik op. “Ons moet seker maak daar’s nie iets eienaardigs aan die gang nie. Ek bedoel, mens weet nooit met sulke vreemde instruksies nie.”

“Hei!” sê Harry verontwaardig toe sy sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* uit sy sak haal en haar towerstaf lig.

“*Specialis revelio!*” sê sy en tik teen die voorblad.

Niks gebeur hoegenaamd nie. Die boek lê net daar, oud en vuil en met bladsye wat omkrul.

“Klaar?” vra Harry geïrriteerd. “Of wil julle wag en kyk of hy ’n paar keer agteroor bollemakiesie slaan?”

“Als lyk in die haak,” sê Hermione terwyl sy die boek nog steeds agterdogtig ankryk. “Ek bedoel, dit lyk my dis regtig ... net ’n teksboek.”

“Goed, dan wil ek dit terughê,” sê Harry en raap dit van die tafel af op, maar die boek gly uit sy hand en beland oop op die vloer.

Niemand anders kyk nie. Harry buk laag af om die boek op te tel en dan sien hy iets wat onderaan die agterblad geskryf staan in dieselfde klein, beknopte handskrif as die instruksies wat hom gehelp het om die botteltjie Felix Felicis te wen, wat nou veilig tussen ’n paar sokkies bo in sy trommel weggesteek is.

Hierdie Boek behoort aan die Halfbloed Prins

CHAPTER TEN



THE HOUSE OF GAUNT

For the rest of the week's Potions lessons Harry continued to follow the Half-Blood Prince's instructions wherever they deviated from Libatius Borage's, with the result that by their fourth lesson Slughorn was raving about Harry's abilities, saying that he had rarely taught anyone so talented. Neither Ron nor Hermione was delighted by this. Although Harry had offered to share his book with both of them, Ron had more difficulty deciphering the handwriting than Harry did, and could not keep asking Harry to read aloud or it might look suspicious. Hermione, meanwhile, was resolutely plowing on with what she called the "official" instructions, but becoming increasingly bad-tempered as they yielded poorer results than the Prince's.

Harry wondered vaguely who the Half-Blood Prince had been. Although the amount of homework they had been given prevented him from reading the whole of his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, he had skimmed through it sufficiently to see that there was barely a page on which the Prince had not made additional notes, not all of them concerned with potion-making. Here and there were directions for what looked like spells that the Prince had made up himself.

“Or herself,” said Hermione irritably, overhearing Harry pointing some of these out to Ron in the common room on Saturday evening. “It might have been a girl. I think the handwriting looks more like a girl’s than a boy’s.”

“The Half-Blood *Prince*, he was called,” Harry said. “How many girls have been Princes?”

Hermione seemed to have no answer to this. She merely scowled and twitched her essay on *The Principles of Rematerialization* away from Ron, who was trying to read it upside down.

Harry looked at his watch and hurriedly put the old copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* back into his bag.

“It’s five to eight, I’d better go, I’ll be late for Dumbledore.”

“Ooooh!” gasped Hermione, looking up at once. “Good luck! We’ll wait up, we want to hear what he teaches you!”

“Hope it goes okay,” said Ron, and the pair of them watched Harry leave through the portrait hole.

Harry proceeded through deserted corridors, though he had to step hastily behind a statue when Professor Trelawney appeared around a corner, muttering to herself as she shuffled a pack of dirty-looking playing cards, reading them as she walked.

“Two of spades: conflict,” she murmured, as she passed the place where Harry crouched, hidden. “Seven of spades: an ill omen. Ten of spades: violence. Knave of spades: a dark young man, possibly troubled, one who dislikes the questioner —”

She stopped dead, right on the other side of Harry’s statue.

“Well, that can’t be right,” she said, annoyed, and Harry heard her reshuffling vigorously as she set off again, leaving nothing but a whiff of cooking sherry behind her. Harry waited until he was quite sure she had gone, then hurried off again until he reached the spot in the seventh-floor corridor where a single gargoyle stood against the wall.

“Acid Pops,” said Harry, and the gargoyle leapt aside; the wall behind it slid apart, and a moving spiral stone staircase was revealed, onto which Harry stepped, so that he was carried in smooth circles up to the door with the brass knocker that led to Dumbledore’s office.

Harry knocked.

“Come in,” said Dumbledore’s voice.

“Good evening, sir,” said Harry, walking into the headmaster’s office.

“Ah, good evening, Harry. Sit down,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “I hope you’ve had an enjoyable first week back at school?”

“Yes, thanks, sir,” said Harry.

“You must have been busy, a detention under your belt already!”

“Er,” began Harry awkwardly, but Dumbledore did not look too stern.

“I have arranged with Professor Snape that you will do your

detention next Saturday instead.”

“Right,” said Harry, who had more pressing matters on his mind than Snape’s detention, and now looked around surreptitiously for some indication of what Dumbledore was planning to do with him this evening. The circular office looked just as it always did; the delicate silver instruments stood on spindle-legged tables, puffing smoke and whirring; portraits of previous headmasters and headmistresses dozed in their frames, and Dumbledore’s magnificent phoenix, Fawkes, stood on his perch behind the door, watching Harry with bright interest. It did not even look as though Dumbledore had cleared a space for dueling practice.

“So, Harry,” said Dumbledore, in a businesslike voice. “You have been wondering, I am sure, what I have planned for you during these — for want of a better word — lessons?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I have decided that it is time, now that you know what prompted Lord Voldemort to try and kill you fifteen years ago, for you to be given certain information.”

There was a pause.

“You said, at the end of last term, you were going to tell me everything,” said Harry. It was hard to keep a note of accusation from his voice. “Sir,” he added.

“And so I did,” said Dumbledore placidly. “I told you everything I know. From this point forth, we shall be leaving the firm foundation of fact and journeying together through the murky marshes of memory into thickets of wildest guesswork. From here on in, Harry, I may be as woefully wrong as Humphrey Belcher, who believed the time was

ripe for a cheese cauldron.”

“But you think you’re right?” said Harry.

“Naturally I do, but as I have already proven to you, I make mistakes like the next man. In fact, being — forgive me — rather cleverer than most men, my mistakes tend to be correspondingly huger.”

“Sir,” said Harry tentatively, “does what you’re going to tell me have anything to do with the prophecy? Will it help me . . . survive?”

“It has a very great deal to do with the prophecy,” said Dumbledore, as casually as if Harry had asked him about the next day’s weather, “and I certainly hope that it will help you to survive.”

Dumbledore got to his feet and walked around the desk, past Harry, who turned eagerly in his seat to watch Dumbledore bending over the cabinet beside the door. When Dumbledore straightened up, he was holding a familiar shallow stone basin etched with odd markings around its rim. He placed the Pensieve on the desk in front of Harry.

“You look worried.”

Harry had indeed been eyeing the Pensieve with some apprehension. His previous experiences with the odd device that stored and revealed thoughts and memories, though highly instructive, had also been uncomfortable. The last time he had disturbed its contents, he had seen much more than he would have wished. But Dumbledore was smiling.

“This time, you enter the Pensieve with me . . . and, even more unusually, with permission.”

“Where are we going, sir?”

“For a trip down Bob Ogden’s memory lane,” said Dumbledore, pulling from his pocket a crystal bottle containing a swirling silvery-white substance.

“Who was Bob Ogden?”

“He was employed by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” said Dumbledore. “He died some time ago, but not before I had tracked him down and persuaded him to confide these recollections to me. We are about to accompany him on a visit he made in the course of his duties. If you will stand, Harry . . .”

But Dumbledore was having difficulty pulling out the stopper of the crystal bottle: His injured hand seemed stiff and painful.

“Shall — shall I, sir?”

“No matter, Harry —”

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the bottle and the cork flew out.

“Sir — how did you injure your hand?” Harry asked again, looking at the blackened fingers with a mixture of revulsion and pity.

“Now is not the moment for that story, Harry. Not yet. We have an appointment with Bob Ogden.”

Dumbledore tipped the silvery contents of the bottle into the Pensieve, where they swirled and shimmered, neither liquid nor gas.

“After you,” said Dumbledore, gesturing toward the bowl.

Harry bent forward, took a deep breath, and plunged his face into the silvery substance. He felt his feet leave the office floor; he was falling, falling through whirling darkness and then, quite suddenly, he was blinking in dazzling sunlight. Before his eyes had adjusted, Dumbledore landed beside him.

They were standing in a country lane bordered by high, tangled

hedgerows, beneath a summer sky as bright and blue as a forget-me-not. Some ten feet in front of them stood a short, plump man wearing enormously thick glasses that reduced his eyes to molelike specks. He was reading a wooden signpost that was sticking out of the brambles on the left-hand side of the road. Harry knew this must be Ogden; he was the only person in sight, and he was also wearing the strange assortment of clothes so often chosen by inexperienced wizards trying to look like Muggles: in this case, a frock coat and spats over a striped one-piece bathing costume. Before Harry had time to do more than register his bizarre appearance, however, Ogden had set off at a brisk walk down the lane.

Dumbledore and Harry followed. As they passed the wooden sign, Harry looked up at its two arms. The one pointing back the way they had come read: GREAT HANGLETON, 5 MILES. The arm pointing after Ogden said LITTLE HANGLETON, 1 MILE.

They walked a short way with nothing to see but the hedgerows, the wide blue sky overhead and the swishing, frock-coated figure ahead. Then the lane curved to the left and fell away, sloping steeply down a hillside, so that they had a sudden, unexpected view of a whole valley laid out in front of them. Harry could see a village, undoubtedly Little Hangleton, nestled between two steep hills, its church and graveyard clearly visible. Across the valley, set on the opposite hillside, was a handsome manor house surrounded by a wide expanse of velvety green lawn.

Ogden had broken into a reluctant trot due to the steep downward slope. Dumbledore lengthened his stride, and Harry hurried to keep up. He thought Little Hangleton must be their final destination and

wondered, as he had done on the night they had found Slughorn, why they had to approach it from such a distance. He soon discovered that he was mistaken in thinking that they were going to the village, however. The lane curved to the right and when they rounded the corner, it was to see the very edge of Ogden's frock coat vanishing through a gap in the hedge.

Dumbledore and Harry followed him onto a narrow dirt track bordered by higher and wilder hedgerows than those they had left behind. The path was crooked, rocky, and potholed, sloping downhill like the last one, and it seemed to be heading for a patch of dark trees a little below them. Sure enough, the track soon opened up at the copse, and Dumbledore and Harry came to a halt behind Ogden, who had stopped and drawn his wand.

Despite the cloudless sky, the old trees ahead cast deep, dark, cool shadows, and it was a few seconds before Harry's eyes discerned the building half-hidden amongst the tangle of trunks. It seemed to him a very strange location to choose for a house, or else an odd decision to leave the trees growing nearby, blocking all light and the view of the valley below. He wondered whether it was inhabited; its walls were mossy and so many tiles had fallen off the roof that the rafters were visible in places. Nettles grew all around it, their tips reaching the windows, which were tiny and thick with grime. Just as he had concluded that nobody could possibly live there, however, one of the windows was thrown open with a clatter, and a thin trickle of steam or smoke issued from it, as though somebody was cooking.

Ogden moved forward quietly and, it seemed to Harry, rather cautiously. As the dark shadows of the trees slid over him, he

stopped again, staring at the front door, to which somebody had nailed a dead snake.

Then there was a rustle and a crack, and a man in rags dropped from the nearest tree, landing on his feet right in front of Ogden, who leapt backward so fast he stood on the tails of his frock coat and stumbled.

“You’re not welcome.”

The man standing before them had thick hair so matted with dirt it could have been any color. Several of his teeth were missing. His eyes were small and dark and stared in opposite directions. He might have looked comical, but he did not; the effect was frightening, and Harry could not blame Ogden for backing away several more paces before he spoke.

“Er — good morning. I’m from the Ministry of Magic —”

“You’re not welcome.”

“Er — I’m sorry — I don’t understand you,” said Ogden nervously.

Harry thought Ogden was being extremely dim; the stranger was making himself very clear in Harry’s opinion, particularly as he was brandishing a wand in one hand and a short and rather bloody knife in the other.

“You understand him, I’m sure, Harry?” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Yes, of course,” said Harry, slightly nonplussed. “Why can’t Ogden — ?”

But as his eyes found the dead snake on the door again, he suddenly understood.

“He’s speaking Parseltongue?”

“Very good,” said Dumbledore, nodding and smiling.

The man in rags was now advancing on Ogden, knife in one hand, wand in the other.

“Now, look —” Ogden began, but too late: There was a bang, and Ogden was on the ground, clutching his nose, while a nasty yellowish goo squirted from between his fingers.

“Morfin!” said a loud voice.

An elderly man had come hurrying out of the cottage, banging the door behind him so that the dead snake swung pathetically. This man was shorter than the first, and oddly proportioned; his shoulders were very broad and his arms overlong, which, with his bright brown eyes, short scrubby hair, and wrinkled face, gave him the look of a powerful, aged monkey. He came to a halt beside the man with the knife, who was now cackling with laughter at the sight of Ogden on the ground.

“Ministry, is it?” said the older man, looking down at Ogden.

“Correct!” said Ogden angrily, dabbing his face. “And you, I take it, are Mr. Gaunt?”

“S’right,” said Gaunt. “Got you in the face, did he?”

“Yes, he did!” snapped Ogden.

“Should’ve made your presence known, shouldn’t you?” said Gaunt aggressively. “This is private property. Can’t just walk in here and not expect my son to defend himself.”

“Defend himself against what, man?” said Ogden, clambering back to his feet.

“Busybodies. Intruders. Muggles and filth.”

Ogden pointed his wand at his own nose, which was still issuing

large amounts of what looked like yellow pus, and the flow stopped at once. Mr. Gaunt spoke out of the corner of his mouth to Morfin.

“Get in the house. Don’t argue.”

This time, ready for it, Harry recognized Parseltongue; even while he could understand what was being said, he distinguished the weird hissing noise that was all Ogden could hear. Morfin seemed to be on the point of disagreeing, but when his father cast him a threatening look he changed his mind, lumbering away to the cottage with an odd rolling gait and slamming the front door behind him, so that the snake swung sadly again.

“It’s your son I’m here to see, Mr. Gaunt,” said Ogden, as he mopped the last of the pus from the front of his coat. “That was Morfin, wasn’t it?”

“Ar, that was Morfin,” said the old man indifferently. “Are you pure-blood?” he asked, suddenly aggressive.

“That’s neither here nor there,” said Ogden coldly, and Harry felt his respect for Ogden rise. Apparently Gaunt felt rather differently. He squinted into Ogden’s face and muttered, in what was clearly supposed to be an offensive tone, “Now I come to think about it, I’ve seen noses like yours down in the village.”

“I don’t doubt it, if your son’s been let loose on them,” said Ogden. “Perhaps we could continue this discussion inside?”

“Inside?”

“Yes, Mr. Gaunt. I’ve already told you. I’m here about Morfin. We sent an owl —”

“I’ve no use for owls,” said Gaunt. “I don’t open letters.”

“Then you can hardly complain that you get no warning of

visitors,” said Ogden tartly. “I am here following a serious breach of Wizarding law, which occurred here in the early hours of this morning —”

“All right, all right, all right!” bellowed Gaunt. “Come in the bleeding house, then, and much good it’ll do you!”

The house seemed to contain three tiny rooms. Two doors led off the main room, which served as kitchen and living room combined. Morfin was sitting in a filthy armchair beside the smoking fire, twisting a live adder between his thick fingers and crooning softly at it in Parseltongue:

Hissy, hissy, little snakey,

Slither on the floor,

You be good to Morfin

Or he’ll nail you to the door.

There was a scuffling noise in the corner beside the open window, and Harry realized that there was somebody else in the room, a girl whose ragged gray dress was the exact color of the dirty stone wall behind her. She was standing beside a steaming pot on a grimy black stove, and was fiddling around with the shelf of squalid-looking pots and pans above it. Her hair was lank and dull and she had a plain, pale, rather heavy face. Her eyes, like her brother’s, stared in opposite directions. She looked a little cleaner than the two men, but Harry thought he had never seen a more defeated-looking person.

“M’daughter, Merope,” said Gaunt grudgingly, as Ogden looked inquiringly toward her.

“Good morning,” said Ogden.

She did not answer, but with a frightened glance at her father turned her back on the room and continued shifting the pots on the shelf behind her.

“Well, Mr. Gaunt,” said Ogden, “to get straight to the point, we have reason to believe that your son, Morfin, performed magic in front of a Muggle late last night.”

There was a deafening clang. Merope had dropped one of the pots.

“*Pick it up!*” Gaunt bellowed at her. “That’s it, grub on the floor like some filthy Muggle, what’s your wand for, you useless sack of muck?”

“Mr. Gaunt, please!” said Ogden in a shocked voice, as Merope, who had already picked up the pot, flushed blotchily scarlet, lost her grip on the pot again, drew her wand shakily from her pocket, pointed it at the pot, and muttered a hasty, inaudible spell that caused the pot to shoot across the floor away from her, hit the opposite wall, and crack in two.

Morfin let out a mad cackle of laughter. Gaunt screamed, “Mend it, you pointless lump, mend it!”

Merope stumbled across the room, but before she had time to raise her wand, Ogden had lifted his own and said firmly, “*Reparo.*” The pot mended itself instantly.

Gaunt looked for a moment as though he was going to shout at Ogden, but seemed to think better of it: Instead, he jeered at his daughter, “Lucky the nice man from the Ministry’s here, isn’t it? Perhaps he’ll take you off my hands, perhaps he doesn’t mind dirty Squibs. . . .”

Without looking at anybody or thanking Ogden, Merope picked up

the pot and returned it, hands trembling, to its shelf. She then stood quite still, her back against the wall between the filthy window and the stove, as though she wished for nothing more than to sink into the stone and vanish.

“Mr. Gaunt,” Ogden began again, “as I’ve said: the reason for my visit —”

“I heard you the first time!” snapped Gaunt. “And so what? Morfin gave a Muggle a bit of what was coming to him — what about it, then?”

“Morfin has broken Wizarding law,” said Ogden sternly.

““Morfin has broken Wizarding law.”” Gaunt imitated Ogden’s voice, making it pompous and singsong. Morfin cackled again. “He taught a filthy Muggle a lesson, that’s illegal now, is it?”

“Yes,” said Ogden. “I’m afraid it is.”

He pulled from an inside pocket a small scroll of parchment and unrolled it.

“What’s that, then, his sentence?” said Gaunt, his voice rising angrily.

“It is a summons to the Ministry for a hearing —”

“Summons! *Summons*? Who do you think you are, summoning my son anywhere?”

“I’m Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad,” said Ogden.

“And you think we’re scum, do you?” screamed Gaunt, advancing on Ogden now, with a dirty yellow-nailed finger pointing at his chest. “Scum who’ll come running when the Ministry tells ’em to? Do you know who you’re talking to, you filthy little Mudblood, do you?”

“I was under the impression that I was speaking to Mr. Gaunt,”

said Ogden, looking wary, but standing his ground.

“That’s right!” roared Gaunt. For a moment, Harry thought Gaunt was making an obscene hand gesture, but then realized that he was showing Ogden the ugly, black-stoned ring he was wearing on his middle finger, waving it before Ogden’s eyes. “See this? See this? Know what it is? Know where it came from? Centuries it’s been in our family, that’s how far back we go, and pure-blood all the way! Know how much I’ve been offered for this, with the Peverell coat of arms engraved on the stone?”

“I’ve really no idea,” said Ogden, blinking as the ring sailed within an inch of his nose, “and it’s quite beside the point, Mr. Gaunt. Your son has committed —”

With a howl of rage, Gaunt ran toward his daughter. For a split second, Harry thought he was going to throttle her as his hand flew to her throat; next moment, he was dragging her toward Ogden by a gold chain around her neck.

“See this?” he bellowed at Ogden, shaking a heavy gold locket at him, while Merope spluttered and gasped for breath.

“I see it, I see it!” said Ogden hastily.

“*Slytherin’s!*” yelled Gaunt. “Salazar Slytherin’s! We’re his last living descendants, what do you say to that, eh?”

“Mr. Gaunt, your daughter!” said Ogden in alarm, but Gaunt had already released Merope; she staggered away from him, back to her corner, massaging her neck and gulping for air.

“So!” said Gaunt triumphantly, as though he had just proved a complicated point beyond all possible dispute. “Don’t you go talking to us as if we’re dirt on your shoes! Generations of purebloods,

wizards all — more than *you* can say, I don't doubt!"

And he spat on the floor at Ogden's feet. Morfin cackled again. Merope, huddled beside the window, her head bowed and her face hidden by her lank hair, said nothing.

"Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden doggedly, "I am afraid that neither your ancestors nor mine have anything to do with the matter in hand. I am here because of Morfin, Morfin and the Muggle he accosted late last night. Our information" — he glanced down at his scroll of parchment — "is that Morfin performed a jinx or hex on the said Muggle, causing him to erupt in highly painful hives."

Morfin giggled.

"*Be quiet, boy,*" snarled Gaunt in Parseltongue, and Morfin fell silent again.

"And so what if he did, then?" Gaunt said defiantly to Ogden. "I expect you've wiped the Muggle's filthy face clean for him, and his memory to boot —"

"That's hardly the point, is it, Mr. Gaunt?" said Ogden. "This was an unprovoked attack on a defenseless —"

"Ar, I had you marked out as a Muggle-lover the moment I saw you," sneered Gaunt, and he spat on the floor again.

"This discussion is getting us nowhere," said Ogden firmly. "It is clear from your son's attitude that he feels no remorse for his actions." He glanced down at his scroll of parchment again. "Morfin will attend a hearing on the fourteenth of September to answer the charges of using magic in front of a Muggle and causing harm and distress to that same Mugg —"

Ogden broke off. The jingling, clopping sounds of horses and loud,

laughing voices were drifting in through the open window. Apparently the winding lane to the village passed very close to the copse where the house stood. Gaunt froze, listening, his eyes wide. Morfin hissed and turned his face toward the sounds, his expression hungry. Merope raised her head. Her face, Harry saw, was starkly white.

“My God, what an eyesore!” rang out a girl’s voice, as clearly audible through the open window as if she had stood in the room beside them. “Couldn’t your father have that hovel cleared away, Tom?”

“It’s not ours,” said a young man’s voice. “Everything on the other side of the valley belongs to us, but that cottage belongs to an old tramp called Gaunt, and his children. The son’s quite mad, you should hear some of the stories they tell in the village —”

The girl laughed. The jingling, clapping noises were growing louder and louder. Morfin made to get out of his armchair.

“*Keep your seat,*” said his father warningly, in Parseltongue.

“Tom,” said the girl’s voice again, now so close they were clearly right beside the house, “I might be wrong — but has somebody nailed a snake to that door?”

“Good lord, you’re right!” said the man’s voice. “That’ll be the son, I told you he’s not right in the head. Don’t look at it, Cecilia, darling.”

The jingling and clapping sounds were now growing fainter again.

“*‘Darling,’*” whispered Morfin in Parseltongue, looking at his sister. “*‘Darling,’ he called her. So he wouldn’t have you anyway.*”

Merope was so white Harry felt sure she was going to faint.

“*What’s that?*” said Gaunt sharply, also in Parseltongue, looking from his son to his daughter. “*What did you say, Morfin?*”

“*She likes looking at that Muggle,*” said Morfin, a vicious expression on his face as he stared at his sister, who now looked terrified. “*Always in the garden when he passes, peering through the hedge at him, isn’t she? And last night —*”

Merope shook her head jerkily, imploringly, but Morfin went on ruthlessly, “*Hanging out of the window waiting for him to ride home, wasn’t she?*”

“*Hanging out of the window to look at a Muggle?*” said Gaunt quietly.

All three of the Gaunts seemed to have forgotten Ogden, who was looking both bewildered and irritated at this renewed outbreak of incomprehensible hissing and rasping.

“*Is it true?*” said Gaunt in a deadly voice, advancing a step or two toward the terrified girl. “*My daughter — pure-blooded descendant of Salazar Slytherin — hankering after a filthy, dirt-veined Muggle?*”

Merope shook her head frantically, pressing herself into the wall, apparently unable to speak.

“*But I got him, Father!*” cackled Morfin. “*I got him as he went by and he didn’t look so pretty with hives all over him, did he, Merope?*”

“*You disgusting little Squib, you filthy little blood traitor!*” roared Gaunt, losing control, and his hands closed around his daughter’s throat.

Both Harry and Ogden yelled “No!” at the same time; Ogden

raised his wand and cried, “*Relashio!*” Gaunt was thrown backward, away from his daughter; he tripped over a chair and fell flat on his back. With a roar of rage, Morfin leapt out of his chair and ran at Ogden, brandishing his bloody knife and firing hexes indiscriminately from his wand.

Ogden ran for his life. Dumbledore indicated that they ought to follow and Harry obeyed, Merope’s screams echoing in his ears.

Ogden hurtled up the path and erupted onto the main lane, his arms over his head, where he collided with the glossy chestnut horse ridden by a very handsome, dark-haired young man. Both he and the pretty girl riding beside him on a gray horse roared with laughter at the sight of Ogden, who bounced off the horse’s flank and set off again, his frock coat flying, covered from head to foot in dust, running pell-mell up the lane.

“I think that will do, Harry,” said Dumbledore. He took Harry by the elbow and tugged. Next moment, they were both soaring weightlessly through darkness, until they landed squarely on their feet, back in Dumbledore’s now twilit office.

“What happened to the girl in the cottage?” said Harry at once, as Dumbledore lit extra lamps with a flick of his wand. “Merope, or whatever her name was?”

“Oh, she survived,” said Dumbledore, reseating himself behind his desk and indicating that Harry should sit down too. “Ogden Apparated back to the Ministry and returned with reinforcements within fifteen minutes. Morfin and his father attempted to fight, but both were overpowered, removed from the cottage, and subsequently convicted by the Wizengamot. Morfin, who already had a record of

Muggle attacks, was sentenced to three years in Azkaban. Marvolo, who had injured several Ministry employees in addition to Ogden, received six months.”

“Marvolo?” Harry repeated wonderingly.

“That’s right,” said Dumbledore, smiling in approval. “I am glad to see you’re keeping up.”

“That old man was — ?”

“Voldemort’s grandfather, yes,” said Dumbledore. “Marvolo, his son, Morfin, and his daughter, Merope, were the last of the Gaunts, a very ancient Wizarding family noted for a vein of instability and violence that flourished through the generations due to their habit of marrying their own cousins. Lack of sense coupled with a great liking for grandeur meant that the family gold was squandered several generations before Marvolo was born. He, as you saw, was left in squalor and poverty, with a very nasty temper, a fantastic amount of arrogance and pride, and a couple of family heirlooms that he treasured just as much as his son, and rather more than his daughter.”

“So Merope,” said Harry, leaning forward in his chair and staring at Dumbledore, “so Merope was . . . Sir, does that mean she was . . . *Voldemort’s mother?*”

“It does,” said Dumbledore. “And it so happens that we also had a glimpse of Voldemort’s father. I wonder whether you noticed?”

“The Muggle Morfin attacked? The man on the horse?”

“Very good indeed,” said Dumbledore, beaming. “Yes, that was Tom Riddle senior, the handsome Muggle who used to go riding past the Gaunt cottage and for whom Merope Gaunt cherished a secret, burning passion.”

“And they ended up married?” Harry said in disbelief, unable to imagine two people less likely to fall in love.

“I think you are forgetting,” said Dumbledore, “that Merope was a witch. I do not believe that her magical powers appeared to their best advantage when she was being terrorized by her father. Once Marvolo and Morfin were safely in Azkaban, once she was alone and free for the first time in her life, then, I am sure, she was able to give full rein to her abilities and to plot her escape from the desperate life she had led for eighteen years.

“Can you not think of any measure Merope could have taken to make Tom Riddle forget his Muggle companion, and fall in love with her instead?”

“The Imperius Curse?” Harry suggested. “Or a love potion?”

“Very good. Personally, I am inclined to think that she used a love potion. I am sure it would have seemed more romantic to her, and I do not think it would have been very difficult, some hot day, when Riddle was riding alone, to persuade him to take a drink of water. In any case, within a few months of the scene we have just witnessed, the village of Little Hangleton enjoyed a tremendous scandal. You can imagine the gossip it caused when the squire’s son ran off with the tramp’s daughter, Merope.

“But the villagers’ shock was nothing to Marvolo’s. He returned from Azkaban, expecting to find his daughter dutifully awaiting his return with a hot meal ready on his table. Instead, he found a clear inch of dust and her note of farewell, explaining what she had done.

“From all that I have been able to discover, he never mentioned her name or existence from that time forth. The shock of her desertion

may have contributed to his early death — or perhaps he had simply never learned to feed himself. Azkaban had greatly weakened Marvolo, and he did not live to see Morfin return to the cottage.”

“And Merope? She . . . she died, didn’t she? Wasn’t Voldemort brought up in an orphanage?”

“Yes, indeed,” said Dumbledore. “We must do a certain amount of guessing here, although I do not think it is difficult to deduce what happened. You see, within a few months of their runaway marriage, Tom Riddle reappeared at the manor house in Little Hangleton without his wife. The rumor flew around the neighborhood that he was talking of being ‘hoodwinked’ and ‘taken in.’ What he meant, I am sure, is that he had been under an enchantment that had now lifted, though I daresay he did not dare use those precise words for fear of being thought insane. When they heard what he was saying, however, the villagers guessed that Merope had lied to Tom Riddle, pretending that she was going to have his baby, and that he had married her for this reason.”

“But she *did* have his baby.”

“But not until a year after they were married. Tom Riddle left her while she was still pregnant.”

“What went wrong?” asked Harry. “Why did the love potion stop working?”

“Again, this is guesswork,” said Dumbledore, “but I believe that Merope, who was deeply in love with her husband, could not bear to continue enslaving him by magical means. I believe that she made the choice to stop giving him the potion. Perhaps, besotted as she was, she had convinced herself that he would by now have fallen in love

with her in return. Perhaps she thought he would stay for the baby's sake. If so, she was wrong on both counts. He left her, never saw her again, and never troubled to discover what became of his son."

The sky outside was inky black and the lamps in Dumbledore's office seemed to glow more brightly than before.

"I think that will do for tonight, Harry," said Dumbledore after a moment or two.

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

He got to his feet, but did not leave.

"Sir . . . is it important to know all this about Voldemort's past?"

"Very important, I think," said Dumbledore.

"And it . . . it's got something to do with the prophecy?"

"It has everything to do with the prophecy."

"Right," said Harry, a little confused, but reassured all the same.

He turned to go, then another question occurred to him, and he turned back again. "Sir, am I allowed to tell Ron and Hermione everything you've told me?"

Dumbledore considered him for a moment, then said, "Yes, I think Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger have proved themselves trustworthy. But Harry, I am going to ask you to ask them not to repeat any of this to anybody else. It would not be a good idea if word got around how much I know, or suspect, about Lord Voldemort's secrets."

"No, sir, I'll make sure it's just Ron and Hermione. Good night."

He turned away again, and was almost at the door when he saw it. Sitting on one of the little spindle-legged tables that supported so many frail-looking silver instruments, was an ugly gold ring set with a large, cracked, black stone.

“Sir,” said Harry, staring at it. “That ring —”

“Yes?” said Dumbledore.

“You were wearing it when we visited Professor Slughorn that night.”

“So I was,” Dumbledore agreed.

“But isn’t it . . . sir, isn’t it the same ring Marvolo Gaunt showed Ogden?”

Dumbledore bowed his head. “The very same.”

“But how come — ? Have you always had it?”

“No, I acquired it very recently,” said Dumbledore. “A few days before I came to fetch you from your aunt and uncle’s, in fact.”

“That would be around the time you injured your hand, then, sir?”

“Around that time, yes, Harry.”

Harry hesitated. Dumbledore was smiling.

“Sir, how exactly — ?”

“Too late, Harry! You shall hear the story another time. Good night.”

“Good night, sir.”

Die Huis van Gaunt

Tydens die res van die week se Towerdrankieklasse hou Harry aan om die Halfbloed Prins se instruksies te volg waar dit van Libatius Borage s'n afwyk, met die gevolg dat Slughorn teen hul vierde les gaande is oor Harry se vermoëns en verklaar dat hy selde nog iemand so talentvol onderrig het. Ron en Hermione is nie een ingenome hiermee nie. Harry het aangebied om sy boek met hulle twee te deel, maar Ron het nog meer as Harry gesukkel om die handskrif te ontsyfer en kon nie aanhoudend vir Harry vra om dit hardop te lees nie, want dit sou te verdag lyk. Hermione het intussen vasberade deur dit wat sy as die “amptelike” instruksies beskryf, geploeg en al hoe kwater geword omdat dit swakker resultate as die Prins s'n oplewer.

Harry wonder vaagweg wie die Halfbloed Prins was. Die hoeveelheid huiswerk wat hulle kry, maak dit vir hom onmoontlik om sy hele eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* te lees, maar hy blaai vinnig daardeur en kom agter daar is beswaarlik een bladsy waarop die Prins nie bykomende notas gemaak het nie, en nie altyd net oor die maak van towerdrankies nie. Hier en daar ontdek Harry ook aanwysings wat lyk soos towerspreuke wat die Prins op sy eie uitgedink het.

“Of op haar eie,” sê Hermione vies die Saterdagmiddag toe sy hoor hoe Harry vir Ron in die geselskamer daarvan vertel. “Dit was dalk ’n meisie. Ek dink die handskrif lyk meer soos ’n meisie as ’n ou s’n.”

“Hy is die Halfbloed Prins genoem,” sê Harry. “Hoeveel meisies was al prinse?”

Hermione het blykbaar nie ’n antwoord hierop nie. Sy kyk Harry suur aan en pluk haar opstel oor “Die Beginsels van Hermaterialisasie” weg voor Ron wat dit onderstebo probeer lees.

Harry kyk op sy horlosie en sit die ou eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* vinnig terug in sy sak.

“Dis vyf voor agt; ek moet liever loop of ek’s laat vir Dumbledore.”

“Oooo!” snak Hermione en kyk dadelik op. “Sterkte! Ons sal opbly; ons wil hoor wat hy jou leer!”

“Hoop dit gaan oukei,” sê Ron en hulle twee kyk hoe Harry deur die portretopening uitgaan.

Harry stap deur die verlate gange en moet vinnig agter ’n standbeeld koes toe professor Trelawney om ’n hoek verskyn. Sy mompel by haarself terwyl sy ’n pak vuil kaarte skommel en in die loop lees.

“Twee van skoppens: konflik,” brom sy en loop verby die plek waar Harry wegkruip. “Sewe van skoppens: ’n slegte voorteken. Tien van skoppens: geweld. Skoppensboer: ’n donker jong man, moontlik beswaard, wat ’n renons in die ondervraer het –”

Sy steek in haar spore vas, reg aan die ander kant van Harry se standbeeld.

“Dit kan nie reg wees nie,” sê sy vererg en Harry hoor hoe sy die kaarte weer met mening skommel terwyl sy aanstap en net die reuk van kooksjerrie agterlaat. Harry wag tot hy doodseker is sy is weg en maak dan vinnig spore tot by die plek in die sewende verdieping se gang waar daar ’n drakekop teen die muur is.

“Suurklontjies,” sê Harry. Die drakekop beweeg eenkant toe; die muur agter hom gly oop en onthul ’n bewegende spiraalkliptrap. Harry gaan staan daarop en die trap neem hom met egalige sirkelbewegings tot by die deur met die koperklopper wat na Dumbledore se kantoor lei.

Harry klop.

“Kom in,” sê Dumbledore se stem.

“Goeienaand, professor,” sê Harry en loop by die Skoolhoof se kantoor in.

“A, goeienaand, Harry. Kom sit,” sê Dumbledore en glimlag. “Ek hoop jy het die eerste week terug op skool geniet?”

“Ja dankie, professor,” sê Harry.

“Jy moet besig gewees het – alreeds ’n detensie op jou kerfstok!”

“E ...” begin Harry ongemaklik, maar Dumbledore lyk nie te streng nie.

“Ek het met professor Snape gereël dat jou detensie tot volgende Saterdag uitgestel word.”

“Reg,” sê Harry, wat aan belangriker dinge as Snape se detensie dink en onderlangs rondkyk om ’n idee te probeer kry van wat Dumbledore beplan om vanaand met hom te doen. Die sirkelvormige kantoor lyk net soos altyd: die delikate silwer instrumente wat op speekbeentafels staan, blaas rook uit en druis sag; vorige skoolhoofde, mans sowel as vrouens, dut in hul portretrame; en

Dumbledore se manjifieke feniks, Fawkes, staan op sy stok agter die deur en hou Harry met lewendige belangstelling dop. Dit lyk nie of Dumbledore êrens plek gemaak het waar hulle vir 'n tweegeveg kan oefen nie.

“Reg, Harry,” sê Dumbledore in 'n saaklike stem. “Ek is seker jy wonder wat ek vir jou beplan tydens hierdie – weens gebrek aan 'n beter woord – lesse?”

“Ja, professor.”

“Wel, ek het besluit dit is tyd, noudat jy weet wat die Heer Voldemort vyftien jaar gelede daartoe beweeg het om jou te probeer doodmaak, om vir jou sekere inligting te gee.”

Daar is 'n pouse. “Aan die einde van verlede kwartaal het u gesê u gaan my alles vertel,” sê Harry. Dit is moeilik om die sarkasme uit sy stem te hou en hy voeg “professor” by.

“Ek het inderdaad,” sê Dumbledore ewe rustig. “Ek het jou alles vertel wat ek geweet het. Van nou af sal ons die stewige fondament van feite agterlaat en saam deur die mistige moerasse van herinneringe reis na ruigtes van wilde raaiskote. Van nou af, Harry, mag ek net so droewig verkeerd wees soos Humphrey Belcher, wat gemeen het die tyd is ryp vir 'n kaasketel.”

“Maar u dink u is reg?” vra Harry.

“Natuurlik dink ek so, hoewel ek alreeds aan jou bewys het ek maak net soos enige ander mens ook foute. Trouens, die feit dat ek – vergewe my – ietwat intelligenter as die meeste mense is, veroorsaak dat my foute dienoooreenkomstig groter is.”

“Professor,” sê Harry versigtig, “het dit wat u my gaan vertel enigiets met die profesie te doen? Sal dit my help ... om te oorleef?”

“Dit het baie met die profesie te doen,” sê Dumbledore so terloops asof Harry hom oor môre se weer uitgevra het, “en ek hoop van harte dit sal jou help om te oorleef.”

Dumbledore staan op. Hy loop om die lessenaar en verby Harry, wat gretig in sy stoel omdraai en kyk hoe hy oor die kabinet langs die deur afbuk. Toe Dumbledore regop kom, hou hy 'n bekende vlak klipkom met vreemde merktekens om die rand vas. Hy sit die Peinssif op die lessenaar voor Harry neer.

“Jy lyk bekommerd.”

Harry kyk inderdaad onrustig na die Peinssif. Sy vorige ondervindings met hierdie eienaardige toestel wat gedagtes en herinneringe wegbêre en openbaar, was nou wel baie insiggewend, maar ook baie ongemaklik. Die laaste keer dat hy die kom se inhoud versteur het, het hy baie meer gesien as wat hy sou wou. Maar Dumbledore glimlag.

“Hierdie keer gaan jy die Peinssif saam met my binne ... en, selfs nog meer ongewoon, met toestemming.”

“Waarheen gaan ons, professor?”

“Ons gaan op Bob Ogden se herinneringe terugreis,” sê Dumbledore en haal ’n kristalbottel waarin daar ’n silwerwit stof maal uit sy sak.

“Wie was Bob Ogden?”

“Hy was in diens van die Departement van Magiese Wetstoepassing,” sê Dumbledore. “Hy’s ’n ruk terug oorlede, maar nie voor ek hom opgespoor en oorreed het om hierdie herinneringe aan my toe te vertrou nie. Ons gaan hom vergesel op ’n besoek wat hy tydens die uitvoer van sy pligte afgelê het. Staan asseblief op, Harry ...”

Maar Dumbledore sukkel om die prop uit die kristalbottel te trek; sy beseerde hand lyk styf en seer.

“Moet – moet ek, professor?”

“Toemaar, Harry –”

Dumbledore wys met sy towerstaf na die bottel en die kurkprop vlieg af.

“Professor – hoe het u hand so seergekry?” vra Harry weer terwyl hy met ’n mengsel van weersin en simpatie na die swart verskroeiende vingers kyk.

“Nou is nie die tyd vir daardie storie nie, Harry. Nog nie. Ons het ’n afspraak met Bob Ogden.”

Dumbledore gooi die bottel se silwer inhoud in die Peinssif uit en dit glinster en gly om en om daarin; nóg vloeistof, nóg gas.

“Jy eerste,” sê Dumbledore en beduie na die kom.

Harry buig vooroor, haal diep asem en dompel sy gesig in die silwer stof. Hy voel sy voete van die kantoortvloer af ophop; hy val verder en verder deur draaiende duisternis en toe, meteens, moet hy sy oë knip, want hy staan in verblindende sonlig. Voor sy oë kan aanpas, verskyn Dumbledore langs hom.

Hulle staan op ’n grondpad met hoë, ruie heinings aan weerskante, onder ’n somerlug so helder en blou soos ’n vergeet-my-nietjie. Omtrent tien tree voor hulle staan daar ’n kort, plomp man met enorme, dik brilglase wat sy oë so klein soos ’n mol s’n laat lyk. Hy lees ’n houtpadwyser wat links van die pad tussen die braambosse uitsteek. Harry weet dit moet Ogden wees; hy is die enigste persoon in sig, en hy dra ook die eienaardige kombinasie klere wat onervare towenaars dikwels kies as hulle soos Moggels probeer lyk: in hierdie geval ’n manel en enkelskuts oor ’n gestreepte eenstuk-swembroek. Maar voor Harry tyd het om meer as sy bisarre voorkoms te registreer, begin Ogden flink met die pad af stap.

Dumbledore en Harry volg hom. Hulle loop verby die padwyser en Harry kyk op na sy twee arms. Een wys terug na waar hulle vandaan kom en lees: "Groot Hangleton, 5 myl". Die arm wat agter Ogden aan wys, sê: "Klein Hangleton, 1 myl."

Hulle loop 'n entjie en sien niks behalwe die heinings, die wye blou lug bokant en die vreemde manelfiguur voor hulle nie. Die pad draai na links en loop dan teen 'n steil heuwel af sodat hulle skielik 'n onverwagse uitsig kry oor 'n hele vallei wat voor hulle uitstrek. Harry sien 'n dorpie, definitief Klein Hangleton, genestel tussen twee steil heuwels, met sy kerk en begraafplaas duidelik sigbaar. Aan die ander kant van die vallei, teen die oorkantse heuwel, is daar 'n pragtige herehuis omring deur 'n uitgestrekte, fluweelgroen grasperk.

Die afdraand is so steil dat Ogden onwillig na 'n drafstappie oorslaan. Dumbledore gee groter treë en Harry moet uithaal om by te hou. Hy aanvaar Klein Hangleton moet hul eindbestemming wees en wonder net soos die nag wat hulle na Slughorn toe is hoekom hulle die plek van so ver af moet nader. Hy kom egter gou agter hy was verkeerd om te dink hulle gaan na die dorpie toe. Die pad swenk na regs en toe hulle om die draai kom, sien hulle Ogden se manelpante deur 'n gat in die heining verdwyn.

Dumbledore en Harry volg hom na 'n nou stofpaadjie met nóg hoër en wilder heinings aan weerskante as die een wat hulle agtergelaat het. Dit is 'n slingerpaadjie vol klippe en slaggate, wat nes die vorige een teen die heuwel af loop; dit lyk of dit na 'n plaat donker bome 'n entjie onderkant hulle lei. En sowaar, die paadjie loop net daarna op die ruigte uit en Dumbledore en Harry kom tot stilstand agter Ogden, wat gaan staan het en sy towerstaf uithaal.

Ten spyte van die wolklose lug gooi die ou bome voor hulle diep, donker, koel skadu's en ná 'n paar sekondes gewaar Harry 'n gebou wat half weggesteek is tussen die verstrengelde stamme. Dit lyk vir hom na 'n baie vreemde plek om 'n huis te bou, of anders 'n eienaardige besluit om die bome so naby te laat groei, want hulle hou al die lig uit en versper die uitsig oor die vallei onder. Hy wonder of daar iemand woon; die mure is met mos bedek en daar het al soveel teëls van die dak afgeval dat die dakbalke plek-plek sigbaar is. Daar groei oral brandnetels, tot so hoog soos die klein venstertjies wat dik met vullis aangepak is. Maar net toe hy tot die gevolgtrekking kom dat daar onmoontlik iemand hier kan woon, word een venster met 'n gekletter oopgegooi en 'n dun strepie stoom of rook kom daar uit asof iemand kos kook.

Ogden beweeg saggies vorentoe en dit lyk vir Harry of hy taam-

lik versigtig is. Die bome se donker skadu's gly oor hom, en hy stop weer en kyk na die voordeur waarteen iemand 'n dooie slang vasgespyker het.

Daar is 'n geritsel en gekraak. 'n Man in toings spring uit die naaste boom en land op sy voete reg voor Ogden, wat so vinnig terugspring dat hy op sy manel se swaeltstert trap en struikel.

"Jy's nie welkom nie."

Die man wat voor hulle staan se dik hare is só gekoek van die vullis dat dit enige kleur kan wees. Daar kom 'n hele paar van sy tande kort. Sy oë is klein en donker en staar in teenoorgestelde rigtings. Hy sou dalk snaaks kon lyk, maar dis nie so nie; hy lyk eintlik vreesaanjaend en Harry neem Ogden nie kwalik dat hy nog 'n paar tree retireer voor hy praat nie.

"E – goeiemôre. Ek is van die Ministerie van Towerkuns –"

"Jy's nie welkom nie."

"E – ek's jammer – ek verstaan nie wat jy sê nie," sê Ogden senuweeagtig.

Harry dink Ogden is geweldig dof; volgens Harry maak die vreemdeling homself baie duidelik, veral aangesien hy 'n towerstaf in een hand rondswaai en 'n kort en ietwat bebloede mes in die ander.

"Ek is seker jy verstaan hom, Harry," sê Dumbledore saggies.

"Ja, natuurlik," sê Harry, effens verward. "Hoekom kan Ogden nie – ?"

Maar sy oë val weer op die dooie slang teen die deur en skielik verstaan hy.

"Hy praat Parseltaal."

"Mooi so," sê Dumbledore; hy knik en glimlag.

Die verflenterde man stap op Ogden af, mes in een hand, towerstaf in die ander.

"Wag nou –" begin Ogden, maar dit is te laat: Daar is 'n slag en Ogden is plat op die grond. Hy gryp na sy neus en daar spuit grille-rige geel etter tussen sy vingers uit.

"Morfin!" sê 'n harde stem.

'n Bejaarde man kom haastig by die huis uit en klap die deur agter hom toe sodat die dooie slang pateties heen en weer swaai. Die man is korter as die eerste een en het die vreemdste proporsies; sy skouers is baie breed en sy arms gans te lank en dit, saam met sy blink bruin oë, kort haarboskasie en verrimpelde gesig, laat hom soos 'n sterk ou aap lyk. Hy kom tot stilstand langs die man met die mes wat nou kraai van die lag vir Ogden wat op die grond lê.

"Van die Ministerie?" sê die ouer man en kyk af na Ogden.

“Korrek!” sê Ogden kwaad en voel-voel aan sy gesig. “En ek neem aan jy is meneer Gaunt?”

“’S reg,” sê Gaunt. “Jou in die gesig gekry, nè?”

“Ja, hy het!” sê Ogden vererg.

“Jy behoort jou teenwoordigheid bekend te maak,” sê Ogden aggressief. “Dis privaat eiendom. Kan nie net hier inloop en verwag my seun moet homself nie verdedig nie.”

“Homself waarteen verdedig?” vra Ogden terwyl hy sukkel om weer op die been te kom.

“Nuuskierige agies. Indringers. Moggels en gemors.”

Ogden raak met sy towerstaf aan sy neus waaruit die geel etter nog steeds aanhoudend loop en dit hou onmiddellik op. Meneer Gaunt praat uit die hoek van sy mond met Morfin.

“Gaan in huis toe. G’n teëpraterij nie.”

Hierdie keer is Harry gereed daarvoor en hy besef dit is Parseltaal. Al kan hy verstaan wat gesê word, hoor hy nog steeds die vreemde siggeluid wat natuurlik al is wat Ogden kan uitmaak. Morfin lyk op die punt om teë te praat, maar sy pa gee hom ’n dreigende kyk wat hom van plan laat verander. Hy beweeg na die huis met ’n snaakse rolstappie en klap die voordeur agter hom toe sodat die slang weer droefgeestig heen en weer swaai.

“Ek is hier om jou seun te sien, meneer Gaunt,” sê Ogden terwyl hy die laaste bietjie etter voor van sy manel afvee. “Dit was Morfin, nie waar nie?”

“Ja, dit was Morfin,” sê die oubaas onverskillig. “Is jy ’n suiwerbloeder?” vra hy skielik aggressief.

“Dis nie ter sake nie,” sê Ogden kil en Harry begin al hoe meer respek vir hom kry.

Blykbaar voel Gaunt anders oor die saak. Hy kyk Ogden stip aan en brom in wat duidelik veronderstel is om ’n beledigende stemtoon te wees: “Noudat ek daaraan dink – ek het al neuse soos joune onder in die dorp gesien.”

“Ek betwyfel dit nie, as jou seun op hulle losgelaat is,” sê Ogden. “Miskien kan ons die gesprek binne voortsit?”

“Binne?”

“Ja, meneer Gaunt. Ek het jou reeds gesê. Ek is hier oor Morfin. Ons het ’n uil gestuur –”

“Ek voel vere vir uile,” sê Gaunt. “Ek maak nie briewe oop nie.”

“Dan kan jy beswaarlik kla dat jy nie van besoekers in kennis gestel word nie,” sê Ogden vererg. “Ek is hier weens ’n ernstige oortreding van die towerwet wat in die vroeë oggendure hier plaasgevind het –”

“Orraait, orraait, orraait!” brul Gaunt. “Kom dan verdomp in, nie dat dit jou veel sal help nie!” Dit lyk of die huis uit drie klein vertrekke bestaan. Twee deure lei na die hoofvertrek wat as kombuis en woonkamer gebruik word. Morfin sit in ’n vieslike leunstoel langs die rokende vuur. Hy vleg ’n lewende adder tussen sy vet vingers deur en neurie sag vir hom in Parseltaal:

Sis, slangetjie, sis,

Seil na hartelus

Sê vir almal hoe goed Morfin vir jou was

So nie spyker hy jou aan die voordeur vas.

Daar is ’n skuifgeluid in die hoek langs die oop venster en Harry besef daar is nog iemand in die vertrek: ’n meisie wie se verslete grys rok presies dieselfde kleur as die vuil klipmuur agter haar is. Sy staan langs ’n stomende pot op ’n smerige swart stoof en werskaf met die morsige potte en panne op die rak bo dit. Haar hare is steil en dof en sy het ’n onaansienlike, bleek, effens swaar gesig. Haar oë kyk nes haar broer s’n in teenoorgestelde rigtings. Sy lyk ’n bietjie skoner as die twee mans, maar Harry dink hy het nog nooit iemand gesien wat so afgehaal daar uitsien nie.

“My dogter, Merope,” sê Gaunt onwillig toe Ogden haar vraend aankyk.

“Goeiemôre,” sê Ogden.

Sy antwoord nie, maar met ’n bang kyk na haar pa draai sy haar rug op die vertrek en hou aan om die potte op die rak rond te skuif.

“Wel, meneer Gaunt,” sê Ogden, “om dadelik tot die punt te kom: Ons het rede om te glo jou seun Morfin het laat laas nag towerkrag voor ’n Moggelhuis gebruik.”

Daar is ’n oorverdowende gekletter. Merope het een van die potte laat val.

“Tel dit op!” bulder Gaunt vir haar. “Dis reg, ja; gooi kos op die vloer soos ’n morsige Moggel! Waarvoor het jy ’n towerstaf, jou nikswerd stuk gemors?”

“Meneer Gaunt, asseblief!” sê Ogden in ’n geskokte stem terwyl Merope, wat die pot al klaar opgetel het, blosend in skarlakenrooi vlekke uitslaan, weer haar greep op die pot verloor, haar towerstaf bewerig uit haar sak haal, daarmee na die pot wys en haastig ’n onhoorbare towerspreuk uiter wat veroorsaak dat die pot oor die vloer weg van haar af skiet, in die oorkantste muur vasvlieg en in twee breek.

Morfin kraai van die lag soos ’n mal mens. Gaunt gil: “Maak dit reg, jou nikswerd klipkop, maak dit reg!”

Merope strompel deur die vertrek, maar voor sy haar towerstaf kan lig, gebruik Ogden syne en sê ferm: "*Reparo.*" Die pot maak homself dadelik weer heel.

Dit lyk vir 'n oomblik of Gaunt op Ogden gaan gil, maar dan bedink hy hom en sê spottend vir sy dogter: "Jy's gelukkig die gawe man van die Ministerie is hier, nè? Miskien sal hy my van jou verlos. Miskien gee hy nie om vir vieslike Sissers nie ..."

Sonder om na enigiemand te kyk of vir Ogden dankie te sê, tel Merope die pot op en sit dit met bewende hande terug op die rak. Dan staan sy doodstil met haar rug teen die muur tussen die besmeerde venster en die stoof asof sy net een wens het: Om in die aarde in te sink en te verdwyn.

"Meneer Gaunt," begin Ogden weer, "soos ek gesê het: Die rede vir my besoek –"

"Ek het jou die eerste keer gehoor!" snou Gaunt hom toe. "So wat daarvan? Morfin het 'n Moggel 'n bietjie op sy plek gesit – wat daarvan, hè?"

"Morfin het die towerwet oortree," sê Ogden streng.

"*Morfin het die towerwet oortree.*" Gaunt maak Ogden se stem na en laat dit hoogdrawend en singerig klink. Morfin kraai weer van die lag. "Hy't 'n vieslike Moggel 'n les geleer, en dis nou ewe skielik onwettig?"

"Ja," sê Ogden. "Ek is bevrees dit is."

Hy haal 'n klein perkamentrol uit sy binnesak en rol dit oop.

"Wat's dit daai? Sy vonnis?" vra Gaunt en verhef sy stem kwaai.

"Dit is 'n dagvaarding om by die Ministerie aan te meld vir 'n verhoor –"

"Dagvaarding? *Dagvaarding!* Wie dink jy is jy om my seun te dagvaar?"

"Ek's Hoof van die Magiese Wetstoepassingspatrolië," sê Ogden.

"En jy dink ons is skuim, nè?" skree Gaunt terwyl hy tot by Ogden loop en met 'n vuilgeel vingernaël na sy borskas wys. "Skuim wat aangehol sal kom as die Ministerie sê hulle moet? Weet jy met wie jy praat, jou vieslike klein Modderbloeder, weet jy?"

"Ek was onder die indruk ek praat met meneer Gaunt," sê Ogden versigtig, maar hy staan nogtans sy man.

"Dis reg!" bulk Gaunt. Vir 'n oomblik dink Harry hy maak 'n obsene handgebaar, maar dan besef hy Gaunt wys vir Ogden die lelike ring met die swart steen wat hy aan sy middelvinger dra en nou voor Ogden se oë rondwaai. "Sien jy dit? Sien jy dit? Weet jy wat dit is? Weet jy waar dit vandaan kom? Dis al eeue lank in ons familie, dis hoe ver ons teruggaan, en ons is suiwerbloeders al die

pad! Weet jy hoeveel is ek al aangebied hiervoor, vir hierdie ring en steen waarop die Peverell-wapenskild gegraveer is?"

"Ek het geen benul nie," sê Ogden, wat sy oë knip toe die ring vlak by sy neus verbyswaai, "en dis glad nie nou ter sake nie, meneer Gaunt. Jou seun het 'n oortreding –"

Met 'n woedekreet storm Gaunt op sy dogter af. Vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde dink Harry hy gaan haar verwurg, want sy hand skiet na haar keel toe uit, maar die volgende oomblik sleep hy haar tot by Ogden aan die goue ketting om haar nek.

"Sien jy dit?" bulder hy vir Ogden en druk die goue hangertjie onder sy neus in terwyl Merope sidderend na asem hyg.

"Ek sien dit, ek sien dit!" sê Ogden haastig.

"Dis Slytherin s'n!" sis Gaunt. "Salazar Slytherin s'n! Ons is sy laaste lewende afstammelinge. Wat sê jy daarvan, hè?"

"Meneer Gaunt, jou dogter!" sê Ogden ontsteld, maar Gaunt het Merope al laat los; sy steier weg van hom af, terug na haar hoek, masseer haar nek en snak steeds na asem.

"So!" sê Gaunt triomfantlik asof hy so pas 'n ingewikkelde geskilpunt onweerlegbaar bewys het. "Moenie jy met ons praat of ons die vullis op jou skoene is nie! Geslagte van suiwerbloeders, almal towenaars – baie meer as wat jy kan sê!"

En hy spoeg op die vloer by Ogden se voete. Morfin kraai weer. Merope staan ineengekrimp by die venster, haar kop hang vooroor sodat haar steil hare haar gesig toemaak en sy sê niks.

"Meneer Gaunt," sê Ogden vasberade, "ek is bevrees nóg jou voorgeslagte nóg myne het enigiets met die saak onder bespreking te doen. Ek is hier oor Morfin, Morfin en die Moggel wat hy laat verlede nag bygedam het. Volgens ons inligting," en hy kyk af na sy perkamentrol, "het Morfin 'n towerspreuk of paljas oor die genoemde Moggel uitgespreek en veroorsaak dat hy in uiters pynlike galbulte uitgeslaan het."

Mofin giggel.

"Stil, seun," sis Gaunt in Parseltaal en Morfin word weer stil.

"En wat daarvan as hy dit gedoen het?" vra Gaunt uitdagend vir Ogden. "Ek is seker jy't die Moggel se vieslike gevreet vir hom skoon gegee, en sy geheue ook."

"Dit is beswaarlik nou ter sake, meneer Gaunt," sê Ogden. "Dit was 'n aanval sonder aanleiding op 'n weerlose –"

"Ek het die oomblik toe ek jou sien sommer geweet jy's 'n Moggelboetie," sê Gaunt vol afsku en spoeg weer op die vloer.

"Ons bereik niks met hierdie gesprek nie," sê Ogden streng. "Jou seun se houding maak dit duidelik dat hy geen berou oor sy optrede

het nie." Hy kyk weer af na sy perkamentrol. "Morfin sal op die veertiende September 'n verhoor bywoon om te antwoord op die klag dat hy towerkrag teen 'n Moggel gebruik het en leed en verdriet aan die betrokke Mog-"

Ogden bly skielik stil. Die geklingel en geklop van perdepote en harde, laggende stemme dryf deur die oop venster in. Blykbaar gaan die kronkelpad na die dorpie baie na aan die ruigte waarin die huis staan verby. Gaunt verstar en luister met groot oë. Morfin sis, draai sy gesig na die klanke en kry 'n honger kyk. Merope lig haar kop. Harry sien haar gesig is spierwit.

"Sies, wat 'n doring in die oog!" weerklink 'n meisie se stem, so duidelik hoorbaar deur die oop venster asof sy in die vertrek langs-aan staan. "Kan jou pa nie van daai krot ontslae raak nie, Tom?"

"Dis nie ons s'n nie," sê 'n jong man se stem. "Alles aan die ander kant van die vallei behoort aan ons, maar daardie huisie behoort aan 'n ou boemelaar genaamd Gaunt en sy kinders. Die seun is mallerig; jy moet hoor watter stories loop in die dorp rond -"

Die meisie lag. Die geklingel en geklop word harder en harder. Morfin wil uit die leunstoel opstaan.

"Bly sit," sê sy pa waarskuwend in Parseltaal.

"Tom," sê die meisie se stem weer, nou so naby dat hulle reg langsaan die huis moet wees, "verbeel ek my - of het iemand 'n slang aan daai deur vasgespyker?"

"Genugtig, jy's reg!" sê die man se stem. "Dit sal die seun wees; hy's nie reg in sy kop nie. Moenie daarna kyk nie, Cecilia, liefing."

Die geklingel en geklop word nou weer dowwer.

"Liefing," sis Morfin in Parseltaal en kyk na sy suster. "Hy't haar 'liefing' genoem, so hy sal jou nie wil hê nie."

Merope is so bleek dat Harry seker is sy gaan flou word.

"Wat sê jy?" sê Gaunt skerp, ook in Parseltaal, en kyk van sy seun na sy dogter. "Wat het jy gesê, Morfin?"

"Sy hou daarvan om vir daai Moggel te kyk," sê Morfin en kyk met 'n wrede uitdrukking op sy gesig na sy suster wat nou angsbevange lyk. "Altyd in die tuin wanneer hy verbygaan. Loer deur die heining vir hom, nè? En gisteraand -"

Merope skud haar kop rukkerig, pleitend, maar Morfin gaan genadeloos aan: "By die venster uitgehang en vir hom gewag om huis toe te ry, nè?"

"By die venster uitgehang om 'n Moggel te sien?" vra Gaunt sag.

Dit lyk of al drie Gaunts vergeet het van Ogden, wat tegelyk verbouereerd en geïrriteerd lyk met hierdie hernieuwe uitbreek van die onverstaanbare gesis en gesuis.

“Is dit waar?” vra Gaunt in ’n doodse stem en kom ’n tree of twee nader aan die verskrikte meisie. “My dogter – ’n suiwerbloed afstameling van Salazar Slytherin – begeer ’n vieslike, vuilhaar Moggel?”

Merope skud haar kop wanhopig en druk haarself teen die muur vas, duidelik nie in staat om iets te sê nie.

“Maar ek het hom gekry, Pa!” giggel Morfin. “Ek het hom gekry toe hy hier verbyry en hy’t lekker lelik gelyk met al daai galbulte oral oor hom, nè, Merope?”

“Jou walglike klein Sisser, jou vieslike klein bloedverraaier!” brul Gaunt. Hy verloor heeltemal beheer en sy hande sluit om sy dogter se nek.

Harry en Ogden gil gelyk: “Nee!”; Ogden lig sy towerstaf en skree: “Relashio!” Gaunt word agtertoe gegooi, weg van sy dogter af; hy struikel oor ’n stoel en val plat op sy rug. Morfin spring met ’n woedende gil uit sy stoel op, hardloop na Ogden, swaai sy bebloede mes wild rond en stuur blindelings towerspreuke met sy towerstaf af.

Ogden hardloop vir sy lewe. Dumbledore wys hulle moet hom volg en Harry maak so terwyl Merope se gille in sy ore weergalm.

Ogden nael met die paadjie op en kom uiteindelik arms oor sy kop bo by die pad uit, waar hy hom vashardloop in ’n blink, goudbruin perd waarop ’n baie aantreklike, jong donkerkop man ry. Hy en die mooi meisie wat langs hom op ’n grys perd ry, skater van die lag vir Ogden wat van kop tot tone vol stof is, net betyds vir die perd koes en halsoorkop met sy wapperende manelpante verder padlangs hardloop.

“Ek dink dis genoeg, Harry,” sê Dumbledore. Hy vat aan Harry se elmboog en trek aan hom. Die volgende oomblik sweef hulle al twee gewigloos deur die donker totdat hulle stewig op hul voete terug in Dumbledore se kantoor beland waar dit nou al skemer is.

“Wat het met die meisie in daai huis gebeur?” vra Harry dadelik terwyl Dumbledore ekstra lampe met ’n raps van sy towerstaf aansteek. “Merope, of wat ook al haar naam was?”

“O, sy het dit oorleef,” sê Dumbledore. Hy gaan sit weer agter sy lessenaar en wys Harry moet ook sit. “Ogden het terug na die Ministerie geappareer en binne vyftien minute met versterkings opgedaag. Morfin en sy pa het probeer baklei, maar hulle is albei oorrompel, daar weggeneem en vervolgens voor die Ringkoptowenaars se hof gedaag. Morfin het reeds ’n rekord van Moggelaanvalle gehad en is tot drie jaar in Azkaban gevonniss. Marvolo, wat bo en behalwe Ogden ook verskeie werknemers van die Ministerie beseer het, het ses maande gekry.”

“Marvolo?” herhaal Harry verwonderd.

“Dis reg,” sê Dumbledore en glimlag goedkeurend. “Ek is bly om te sien jy hou by.”

“Daai ou man was – ?”

“Voldemort se oupa, ja,” sê Dumbledore. “Marvolo, sy seun Morfin en sy dogter Merope was die laaste van die Gaunts, ’n baie ou towenaarsfamilie bekend vir ’n onstabiele en gewelddadige streep wat deur die geslagte heen toegeneem het weens hul gewoonte om met hul neefs en niggies te trou. ’n Gebrek aan gesonde verstand en ’n groot voorkeur vir prag en praal het veroorsaak dat die familie-goud etlike geslagte voor Marvolo se geboorte al verkwis is. Hy, soos jy kon sien, is in smerigheid en armoede agtergelaat, met ’n baie lelike humeur, ’n geweldige dosis arrogansie en trots, en ’n paar familie-erfstukke wat vir hom net so kosbaar soos sy seun was, en baie meer as sy dogter.

“Merope,” sê Harry, wat vorentoe leun in sy stoel en Dumbledore aanstaar, “Merope was ... Beteken dit sy was ... *Voldemort se ma*?”

“Einste,” sê Dumbledore. “En ons het Voldemort se pa toevallig ook vlugtig gesien. Ek wonder of jy agtergekom het?”

“Die Moggel wat Morfin aangeval het? Die man op die perd?”

“Knap gedaan,” sê Dumbledore stralend. “Ja, dit was Tom Riddle Senior, die aantreklike Moggel wat gereeld verby die Gaunts se huis gery het en vir wie Merope Gaunt heimlik ’n brandende hartstog gekoester het.”

“En hulle’t op die ou end getrou?” vra Harry ongelowig, want hy kan nie dink aan twee mense wat minder by mekaar pas nie.

“Ek dink jy vergeet,” sê Dumbledore, “dat Merope ’n heks was. Ek glo nie haar towerkragte het tot hul reg gekom terwyl haar pa haar so geterroriseer het nie. Maar toe Marvolo en Morfin eers veilig in Azkaban opgesluit was, toe sy alleen en vir die eerste keer in haar lewe uiteindelik vry was, is ek seker sy kon vrye teuels gee aan haar vermoëns en begin beplan hoe om te ontsnap aan die haglike omstandighede waaronder sy vir agtien jaar moes lewe.

“Kan jy dink aan enigiets wat Merope kon gebruik het om te sorg dat Tom Riddle sy Moggelmetgesel vergeet en op haar verlief raak?”

“Die Imperiusvloek?” stel Harry voor. “Of ’n liefdesdrankie?”

“Baie mooi. Persoonlik is ek geneig om te dink sy het ’n liefdesdrankie gebruik. Ek is seker dit sou vir haar meer romanties gelyk het en ek dink nie dit kon baie moeilik gewees het om Riddle op ’n warm dag toe hy alleen rondgery het, te oortuig om ’n slukkie water te drink nie. In elk geval, ’n paar maande ná die toneel wat ons so pas

anskou het, was daar 'n reuseskandaal in die dorpie Klein Hangleton. Jy kan dink wat 'n geskinder dit afgegee het toe die landheer se seun met die boemelaar se dogter, Merope, weggeloop het.

“Maar die dorpenaars se skok was niks in vergelyking met Marvolo s'n nie. Hy het teruggekom van Azkaban af en verwag sy dogter gaan hom pligsgetrou met 'n warm maaltyd op sy tafel in wag. Maar pleks daarvan kry hy toe 'n dik laag stof en 'n afskeidsbriefie waarin sy verduidelik wat sy gedoen het.

“Volgens wat ek kon uitvind, het hy haar naam of bestaan van daardie dag af nooit weer genoem nie. Die skok van haar weglopery het moontlik tot sy vroeë dood bygedra – of miskien het hy net nooit geleer om vir homself kos te maak nie. Marvolo het baie agteruitgegaan in Azkaban en nie meer geleef toe Morfin uiteindelik huis toe kom nie.”

“En Merope? Sy ... sy's dood, nie waar nie? Het Voldemort nie in 'n weeshuis grootgeword nie?”

“Ja, inderdaad,” sê Dumbledore. “Ons moet hier in 'n mate raai, hoewel ek nie dink dit is moeilik om af te lei wat gebeur het nie. Jy sien, binne 'n paar maande ná hul skelm trouery het Tom Riddle weer by die herehuis in Klein Hangleton opgedaag sonder sy vrou. Volgens gerugte in die omgewing het hy gesê hy is ‘bedrieg’ en ‘mislei’. Ek meen hy het bedoel hy was onder 'n betowering wat nou verdwyn het, hoewel ek aanneem dat hy dit nie sou waag om daardie presiese woorde te gebruik nie, uit vrees dat almal sou dink hy is sy sinne kwyt. Maar toe hulle hoor wat hy sê, het die dorpenaars geraai dat Merope vir Tom Riddle gejok het en voorgegee het sy verwag sy baba en dat hy daarom met haar getroud is.”

“Maar sy het sy baba gehad.”

“Ja, maar eers 'n jaar nadat hulle getroud is. Tom Riddle het haar verlaat terwyl sy nog swanger was.”

“Wat het verkeerd gegaan?” vra Harry. “Hoekom het die liefdesdrankie opgehou werk?”

“Ek raai weer eens,” sê Dumbledore, “maar ek glo Merope was regtig innig lief vir haar man en sy kon dit nie verdra om hom op 'n magiese manier aan haar verslaaf te maak nie. Ek glo sy het besluit om nie meer vir hom die towerdrankie te gee nie. Miskien was sy so smoorverlief dat sy haarself oortuig het hy sou haar teen daardie tyd al leer liefkry het. Miskien het sy gedink hy sou ter wille van die baba bly. Indien wel, was sy in albei gevalle verkeerd. Hy het haar verlaat, haar nooit weer gesien nie, en nooit die moeite gedoen om uit te vind wat van sy seun geword het nie.”

Die lug buite is inkswart en dit lyk of die lampe in Dumbledore se kantoor helderder as voorheen brand.

“Ek dink dis genoeg vir vanaand, Harry,” sê Dumbledore ná ’n oomblik of twee.

“Ja, professor,” sê Harry.

Hy staan op, maar loop nie.

“Professor ... is dit belangrik om al hierdie dinge oor Voldemort se verlede te weet?”

“Baie belangrik, dink ek,” sê Dumbledore.

“En het dit ... het dit iets met die profesie te doen?”

“Dit het alles met die profesie te doen.”

“Reg,” sê Harry ’n bietjie verward, maar nogtans gerusgestel.

Hy draai om en wil loop, maar dan kom daar nog ’n vraag by hom op en hy draai weer terug na Dumbledore.

“Professor, mag ek vir Ron en Hermione alles vertel wat u vir my vertel het?”

Dumbledore kyk hom ’n oomblik aan en sê dan: “Ja, ek dink meneer Weasley en juffrou Granger het bewys hulle is betroubaar. Maar Harry, ek gaan jou vra om vir hulle te vra om niks hiervan aan enigiemand anders oor te vertel nie. Dit sal nie ’n goeie idee wees as dit rugbaar word hoeveel ek van die heer Voldemort se geheime weet of vermoed nie.”

“Reg, professor, ek sal seker maak net Ron en Hermione weet daarvan. Goeienag.”

Hy draai weer weg en is amper by die deur toe hy dit sien. Daar op een van die klein speekbeentafeltjies waarop soveel delikate silwer instrumente staan, lê ’n lelike goue ring waarin ’n groot, gekraakte swart steen geset is.

“Professor,” sê Harry terwyl hy daarna staar. “Daardie ring –”

“Ja?” sê Dumbledore.

“U het dit gedra die nag wat ons by professor Slughorn was.”

“Ek het, ja,” stem Dumbledore saam.

“Maar is dit nie ... Professor, is dit nie dieselfde ring wat Marvolo Gaunt vir Ogden gewys het nie?”

Dumbledore buig sy kop vooroor. “Een en dieselfde.”

“Maar hoe – ? Het u dit nog altyd gehad?”

“Nee, ek het dit baie onlangs eers gekry,” sê Dumbledore. “Om die waarheid te sê, net ’n paar dae voor ek jou by jou oom en tante gaan haal het.”

“Dan was dit omtrent daai tyd dat u hand seergekry het?”

“Omtrent daardie tyd, ja, Harry.”

Harry huiwer. Dumbledore glimlag.

“Professor, hoe presies – ?”

“Te laat, Harry! Jy sal die storie ’n ander keer hoor. Goeienag.”

“Goeienag, professor.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



HERMIONE'S HELPING HAND

As Hermione had predicted, the sixth years' free periods were not the hours of blissful relaxation Ron had anticipated, but times in which to attempt to keep up with the vast amount of homework they were being set. Not only were they studying as though they had exams every day, but the lessons themselves had become more demanding than ever before. Harry barely understood half of what Professor McGonagall said to them these days; even Hermione had had to ask her to repeat instructions once or twice. Incredibly, and to Hermione's increasing resentment, Harry's best subject had suddenly become Potions, thanks to the Half-Blood Prince.

Nonverbal spells were now expected, not only in Defense Against

the Dark Arts, but in Charms and Transfiguration too. Harry frequently looked over at his classmates in the common room or at mealtimes to see them purple in the face and straining as though they had overdosed on U-No-Poo; but he knew that they were really struggling to make spells work without saying incantations aloud. It was a relief to get outside into the greenhouses; they were dealing with more dangerous plants than ever in Herbology, but at least they were still allowed to swear loudly if the Venomous Tentacula seized them unexpectedly from behind.

One result of their enormous workload and the frantic hours of practicing nonverbal spells was that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had so far been unable to find time to go and visit Hagrid. He had stopped coming to meals at the staff table, an ominous sign, and on the few occasions when they had passed him in the corridors or out in the grounds, he had mysteriously failed to notice them or hear their greetings.

“We’ve got to go and explain,” said Hermione, looking up at Hagrid’s huge empty chair at the staff table the following Saturday at breakfast.

“We’ve got Quidditch tryouts this morning!” said Ron. “*And* we’re supposed to be practicing that Aguamenti Charm from Flitwick! Anyway, explain what? How are we going to tell him we hated his stupid subject?”

“We didn’t hate it!” said Hermione.

“Speak for yourself, I haven’t forgotten the skrewts,” said Ron darkly. “And I’m telling you now, we’ve had a narrow escape. You didn’t hear him going on about his gormless brother — we’d have

been teaching Grawp how to tie his shoelaces if we'd stayed."

"I hate not talking to Hagrid," said Hermione, looking upset.

"We'll go down after Quidditch," Harry assured her. He too was missing Hagrid, although like Ron he thought that they were better off without Grawp in their lives. "But trials might take all morning, the number of people who have applied." He felt slightly nervous at confronting the first hurdle of his Captaincy. "I dunno why the team's this popular all of a sudden."

"Oh, come on, Harry," said Hermione, suddenly impatient. "It's not *Quidditch* that's popular, it's you! You've never been more interesting, and frankly, you've never been more fanciable."

Ron gagged on a large piece of kipper. Hermione spared him one look of disdain before turning back to Harry.

"Everyone knows you've been telling the truth now, don't they? The whole Wizarding world has had to admit that you were right about Voldemort being back and that you really have fought him twice in the last two years and escaped both times. And now they're calling you 'the Chosen One' — well, come on, can't you see why people are fascinated by you?"

Harry was finding the Great Hall very hot all of a sudden, even though the ceiling still looked cold and rainy.

"*And* you've been through all that persecution from the Ministry when they were trying to make out you were unstable and a liar. You can still see the marks on the back of your hand where that evil woman made you write with your own blood, but you stuck to your story anyway. . . ."

"You can still see where those brains got hold of me in the

Ministry, look,” said Ron, shaking back his sleeves.

“And it doesn’t hurt that you’ve grown about a foot over the summer either,” Hermione finished, ignoring Ron.

“I’m tall,” said Ron inconsequentially.

The post owls arrived, swooping down through rain-flecked windows, scattering everyone with droplets of water. Most people were receiving more post than usual; anxious parents were keen to hear from their children and to reassure them, in turn, that all was well at home. Harry had received no mail since the start of term; his only regular correspondent was now dead and although he had hoped that Lupin might write occasionally, he had so far been disappointed. He was very surprised, therefore, to see the snowy white Hedwig circling amongst all the brown and gray owls. She landed in front of him carrying a large, square package. A moment later, an identical package landed in front of Ron, crushing beneath it his minuscule and exhausted owl, Pigwidgeon.

“Ha!” said Harry, unwrapping the parcel to reveal a new copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, fresh from Flourish and Blotts.

“Oh good,” said Hermione, delighted. “Now you can give that graffitied copy back.”

“Are you mad?” said Harry. “I’m keeping it! Look, I’ve thought it out —”

He pulled the old copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* out of his bag and tapped the cover with his wand, muttering, “*Diffindo!*” The cover fell off. He did the same thing with the brand-new book (Hermione looked scandalized). He then swapped the covers, tapped each, and said, “*Reparo!*”

There sat the Prince's copy, disguised as a new book, and there sat the fresh copy from Flourish and Blotts, looking thoroughly secondhand.

"I'll give Slughorn back the new one, he can't complain, it cost nine Galleons."

Hermione pressed her lips together, looking angry and disapproving, but was distracted by a third owl landing in front of her carrying that day's copy of the *Daily Prophet*. She unfolded it hastily and scanned the front page.

"Anyone we know dead?" asked Ron in a determinedly casual voice; he posed the same question every time Hermione opened her paper.

"No, but there have been more dementor attacks," said Hermione. "And an arrest."

"Excellent, who?" said Harry, thinking of Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Stan Shunpike," said Hermione.

"What?" said Harry, startled.

"*'Stanley Shunpike, conductor on the popular Wizarding conveyance the Knight Bus, has been arrested on suspicion of Death Eater activity. Mr. Shunpike, 21, was taken into custody late last night after a raid on his Clapham home . . .'*"

"Stan Shunpike, a Death Eater?" said Harry, remembering the spotty youth he had first met three years before. "No way!"

"He might have been put under the Imperius Curse," said Ron reasonably. "You never can tell."

"It doesn't look like it," said Hermione, who was still reading. "It says here he was arrested after he was overheard talking about the

Death Eaters' secret plans in a pub." She looked up with a troubled expression on her face. "If he was under the Imperius Curse, he'd hardly stand around gossiping about their plans, would he?"

"It sounds like he was trying to make out he knew more than he did," said Ron. "Isn't he the one who claimed he was going to become Minister of Magic when he was trying to chat up those veela?"

"Yeah, that's him," said Harry. "I dunno what they're playing at, taking Stan seriously."

"They probably want to look as though they're doing something," said Hermione, frowning. "People are terrified — you know the Patil twins' parents want them to go home? And Eloise Midgen has already been withdrawn. Her father picked her up last night."

"What!" said Ron, goggling at Hermione. "But Hogwarts is safer than their homes, bound to be! We've got Aurors, and all those extra protective spells, and we've got Dumbledore!"

"I don't think we've got him all the time," said Hermione very quietly, glancing toward the staff table over the top of the *Prophet*. "Haven't you noticed? His seat's been empty as often as Hagrid's this past week."

Harry and Ron looked up at the staff table. The headmaster's chair was indeed empty. Now Harry came to think of it, he had not seen Dumbledore since their private lesson a week ago.

"I think he's left the school to do something with the Order," said Hermione in a low voice. "I mean . . . it's all looking serious, isn't it?"

Harry and Ron did not answer, but Harry knew that they were all

thinking the same thing. There had been a horrible incident the day before, when Hannah Abbott had been taken out of Herbology to be told her mother had been found dead. They had not seen Hannah since.

When they left the Gryffindor table five minutes later to head down to the Quidditch pitch, they passed Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil. Remembering what Hermione had said about the Patil twins' parents wanting them to leave Hogwarts, Harry was unsurprised to see that the two best friends were whispering together, looking distressed. What did surprise him was that when Ron drew level with them, Parvati suddenly nudged Lavender, who looked around and gave Ron a wide smile. Ron blinked at her, then returned the smile uncertainly. His walk instantly became something more like a strut. Harry resisted the temptation to laugh, remembering that Ron had refrained from doing so after Malfoy had broken Harry's nose; Hermione, however, looked cold and distant all the way down to the stadium through the cool, misty drizzle, and departed to find a place in the stands without wishing Ron good luck.

As Harry had expected, the trials took most of the morning. Half of Gryffindor House seemed to have turned up, from first years who were nervously clutching a selection of the dreadful old school brooms, to seventh years who towered over the rest, looking coolly intimidating. The latter included a large, wiry-haired boy Harry recognized immediately from the Hogwarts Express.

"We met on the train, in old Sluggy's compartment," he said confidently, stepping out of the crowd to shake Harry's hand. "Cormac McLaggen, Keeper."

“You didn’t try out last year, did you?” asked Harry, taking note of the breadth of McLaggen and thinking that he would probably block all three goal hoops without even moving.

“I was in the hospital wing when they held the trials,” said McLaggen, with something of a swagger. “Ate a pound of doxy eggs for a bet.”

“Right,” said Harry. “Well . . . if you wait over there . . .”

He pointed over to the edge of the pitch, close to where Hermione was sitting. He thought he saw a flicker of annoyance pass over McLaggen’s face and wondered whether McLaggen expected preferential treatment because they were both “old Sluggy’s” favorites.

Harry decided to start with a basic test, asking all applicants for the team to divide into groups of ten and fly once around the pitch. This was a good decision: The first ten was made up of first years and it could not have been plainer that they had hardly ever flown before. Only one boy managed to remain airborne for more than a few seconds, and he was so surprised he promptly crashed into one of the goalposts.

The second group was comprised of ten of the silliest girls Harry had ever encountered, who, when he blew his whistle, merely fell about giggling and clutching one another. Romilda Vane was amongst them. When he told them to leave the pitch, they did so quite cheerfully and went to sit in the stands to heckle everyone else.

The third group had a pileup halfway around the pitch. Most of the fourth group had come without broomsticks. The fifth group were Hufflepuffs.

“If there’s anyone else here who’s not from Gryffindor,” roared Harry, who was starting to get seriously annoyed, “leave now, please!”

There was a pause, then a couple of little Ravenclaws went sprinting off the pitch, snorting with laughter.

After two hours, many complaints, and several tantrums, one involving a crashed Comet Two Sixty and several broken teeth, Harry had found himself three Chasers: Katie Bell, returned to the team after an excellent trial; a new find called Demelza Robins, who was particularly good at dodging Bludgers; and Ginny Weasley, who had outflowed all the competition and scored seventeen goals to boot. Pleased though he was with his choices, Harry had also shouted himself hoarse at the many complainers and was now enduring a similar battle with the rejected Beaters.

“That’s my final decision and if you don’t get out of the way for the Keepers I’ll hex you,” he bellowed.

Neither of his chosen Beaters had the old brilliance of Fred and George, but he was still reasonably pleased with them: Jimmy Peakes, a short but broad-chested third-year boy who had managed to raise a lump the size of an egg on the back of Harry’s head with a ferociously hit Bludger, and Ritchie Coote, who looked weedy but aimed well. They now joined the spectators in the stands to watch the selection of their last team member.

Harry had deliberately left the trial of the Keepers until last, hoping for an emptier stadium and less pressure on all concerned. Unfortunately, however, all the rejected players and a number of people who had come down to watch after a lengthy breakfast had

joined the crowd by now, so that it was larger than ever. As each Keeper flew up to the goal hoops, the crowd roared and jeered in equal measure. Harry glanced over at Ron, who had always had a problem with nerves; Harry had hoped that winning their final match last term might have cured it, but apparently not. Ron was a delicate shade of green.

None of the first five applicants saved more than two goals apiece. To Harry's great disappointment, Cormac McLaggen saved four penalties out of five. On the last one, however, he shot off in completely the wrong direction; the crowd laughed and booed and McLaggen returned to the ground grinding his teeth.

Ron looked ready to pass out as he mounted his Cleansweep Eleven. "Good luck!" cried a voice from the stands. Harry looked around, expecting to see Hermione, but it was Lavender Brown. He would have quite liked to have hidden his face in his hands, as she did a moment later, but thought that as the Captain he ought to show slightly more grit, and so turned to watch Ron do his trial.

Yet he need not have worried: Ron saved one, two, three, four, five penalties in a row. Delighted, and resisting joining in the cheers of the crowd with difficulty, Harry turned to McLaggen to tell him that, most unfortunately, Ron had beaten him, only to find McLaggen's red face inches from his own. He stepped back hastily.

"His sister didn't really try," said McLaggen menacingly. There was a vein pulsing in his temple like the one Harry had often admired in Uncle Vernon's. "She gave him an easy save."

"Rubbish," said Harry coldly. "That was the one he nearly missed."

McLaggen took a step nearer Harry, who stood his ground this time.

“Give me another go.”

“No,” said Harry. “You’ve had your go. You saved four. Ron saved five. Ron’s Keeper, he won it fair and square. Get out of my way.”

He thought for a moment that McLaggen might punch him, but he contented himself with an ugly grimace and stormed away, growling what sounded like threats to thin air.

Harry turned around to find his new team beaming at him.

“Well done,” he croaked. “You flew really well —”

“You did brilliantly, Ron!”

This time it really was Hermione running toward them from the stands; Harry saw Lavender walking off the pitch, arm in arm with Parvati, a rather grumpy expression on her face. Ron looked extremely pleased with himself and even taller than usual as he grinned at the team and at Hermione.

After fixing the time of their first full practice for the following Thursday, Harry, Ron, and Hermione bade good-bye to the rest of the team and headed off toward Hagrid’s. A watery sun was trying to break through the clouds now and it had stopped drizzling at last. Harry felt extremely hungry; he hoped there would be something to eat at Hagrid’s.

“I thought I was going to miss that fourth penalty,” Ron was saying happily. “Tricky shot from Demelza, did you see, had a bit of spin on it —”

“Yes, yes, you were magnificent,” said Hermione, looking amused.

“I was better than that McLaggen anyway,” said Ron in a highly satisfied voice. “Did you see him lumbering off in the wrong direction on his fifth? Looked like he’d been Confunded. . . .”

To Harry’s surprise, Hermione turned a very deep shade of pink at these words. Ron noticed nothing; he was too busy describing each of his other penalties in loving detail.

The great gray hippogriff, Buckbeak, was tethered in front of Hagrid’s cabin. He clicked his razor-sharp beak at their approach and turned his huge head toward them.

“Oh dear,” said Hermione nervously. “He’s still a bit scary, isn’t he?”

“Come off it, you’ve ridden him, haven’t you?” said Ron.

Harry stepped forward and bowed low to the hippogriff without breaking eye contact or blinking. After a few seconds, Buckbeak sank into a bow too.

“How are you?” Harry asked him in a low voice, moving forward to stroke the feathery head. “Missing him? But you’re okay here with Hagrid, aren’t you?”

“Oi!” said a loud voice.

Hagrid had come striding around the corner of his cabin wearing a large flowery apron and carrying a sack of potatoes. His enormous boarhound, Fang, was at his heels; Fang gave a booming bark and bounded forward.

“Git away from him! He’ll have yer fingers — oh. It’s yeh lot.”

Fang was jumping up at Hermione and Ron, attempting to lick their ears. Hagrid stood and looked at them all for a split second, then turned and strode into his cabin, slamming the door behind him.

“Oh dear!” said Hermione, looking stricken.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Harry grimly. He walked over to the door and knocked loudly.

“Hagrid! Open up, we want to talk to you!”

There was no sound from within.

“If you don’t open the door, we’ll blast it open!” Harry said, pulling out his wand.

“Harry!” said Hermione, sounding shocked. “You can’t possibly —”

“Yeah, I can!” said Harry. “Stand back —”

But before he could say anything else, the door flew open again as Harry had known it would, and there stood Hagrid, glowering down at him and looking, despite the flowery apron, positively alarming.

“I’m a teacher!” he roared at Harry. “A teacher, Potter! How dare yeh threaten ter break down my door!”

“I’m sorry, *sir*,” said Harry, emphasizing the last word as he stowed his wand inside his robes.

Hagrid looked stunned. “Since when have yeh called me ‘sir’?”

“Since when have you called me ‘Potter’?”

“Oh, very clever,” growled Hagrid. “Very amusin’. That’s me outsmarted, innit? All righ’, come in then, yeh ungrateful little . . .”

Mumbling darkly, he stood back to let them pass. Hermione scurried in after Harry, looking rather frightened.

“Well?” said Hagrid grumpily, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down around his enormous wooden table, Fang laying his head immediately upon Harry’s knee and drooling all over his robes.

“What’s this? Feelin’ sorry for me? Reckon I’m lonely or summat?”

“No,” said Harry at once. “We wanted to see you.”

“We’ve missed you!” said Hermione tremulously.

“Missed me, have yeh?” snorted Hagrid. “Yeah. Righ’.”

He stomped around, brewing up tea in his enormous copper kettle, muttering all the while. Finally he slammed down three bucket-sized mugs of mahogany-brown tea in front of them and a plate of his rock cakes. Harry was hungry enough even for Hagrid’s cooking, and took one at once.

“Hagrid,” said Hermione timidly, when he joined them at the table and started peeling his potatoes with a brutality that suggested that each tuber had done him a great personal wrong, “we really wanted to carry on with Care of Magical Creatures, you know.”

Hagrid gave another great snort. Harry rather thought some bogeys landed on the potatoes, and was inwardly thankful that they were not staying for dinner.

“We did!” said Hermione. “But none of us could fit it into our schedules!”

“Yeah. Righ’,” said Hagrid again.

There was a funny squelching sound and they all looked around: Hermione let out a tiny shriek, and Ron leapt out of his seat and hurried around the table away from the large barrel standing in the corner that they had only just noticed. It was full of what looked like foot-long maggots, slimy, white, and writhing.

“What are they, Hagrid?” asked Harry, trying to sound interested rather than revolted, but putting down his rock cake all the same.

“Jus’ giant grubs,” said Hagrid.

“And they grow into . . . ?” said Ron, looking apprehensive.

“They won’ grow inter nuthin’,” said Hagrid. “I got ’em ter feed ter Aragog.”

And without warning, he burst into tears.

“Hagrid!” cried Hermione, leaping up, hurrying around the table the long way to avoid the barrel of maggots, and putting an arm around his shaking shoulders. “What is it?”

“It’s . . . him . . .” gulped Hagrid, his beetle-black eyes streaming as he mopped his face with his apron. “It’s . . . Aragog. . . . I think he’s dyin’. . . . He got ill over the summer an’ he’s not gettin’ better. . . . I don’ know what I’ll do if he . . . if he . . . We’ve bin tergether so long. . . .”

Hermione patted Hagrid’s shoulder, looking at a complete loss for anything to say. Harry knew how she felt. He had known Hagrid to present a vicious baby dragon with a teddy bear, seen him croon over giant scorpions with suckers and stingers, attempt to reason with his brutal giant of a half-brother, but this was perhaps the most incomprehensible of all his monster fancies: the gigantic talking spider, Aragog, who dwelled deep in the Forbidden Forest and which he and Ron had only narrowly escaped four years previously.

“Is there — is there anything we can do?” Hermione asked, ignoring Ron’s frantic grimaces and head-shakings.

“I don’ think there is, Hermione,” choked Hagrid, attempting to stem the flood of his tears. “See, the rest o’ the tribe . . . Aragog’s family . . . they’re gettin’ a bit funny now he’s ill . . . bit restive . . .”

“Yeah, I think we saw a bit of that side of them,” said Ron in an undertone.

“... I don’ reckon it’d be safe fer anyone but me ter go near the colony at the mo’,” Hagrid finished, blowing his nose hard on his apron and looking up. “But thanks fer offerin’, Hermione. . . . It means a lot. . . .”

After that, the atmosphere lightened considerably, for although neither Harry nor Ron had shown any inclination to go and feed giant grubs to a murderous, gargantuan spider, Hagrid seemed to take it for granted that they would have liked to have done and became his usual self once more.

“Ar, I always knew yeh’d find it hard ter squeeze me inter yer timetables,” he said gruffly, pouring them more tea. “Even if yeh applied fer Time-Turners —”

“We couldn’t have done,” said Hermione. “We smashed the entire stock of Ministry Time-Turners when we were there last summer. It was in the *Daily Prophet*.”

“Ar, well then,” said Hagrid. “There’s no way yeh could’ve done it. . . . I’m sorry I’ve bin — yeh know — I’ve jus’ bin worried about’ Aragog . . . an’ I did wonder whether, if Professor Grubbly-Plank had bin teachin’ yeh —”

At which all three of them stated categorically and untruthfully that Professor Grubbly-Plank, who had substituted for Hagrid a few times, was a dreadful teacher, with the result that by the time Hagrid waved them off the premises at dusk, he looked quite cheerful.

“I’m starving,” said Harry, once the door had closed behind them and they were hurrying through the dark and deserted grounds; he had abandoned the rock cake after an ominous cracking noise from one of his back teeth. “And I’ve got that detention with Snape tonight, I

haven't got much time for dinner. . . .”

As they came into the castle they spotted Cormac McLaggen entering the Great Hall. It took him two attempts to get through the doors; he ricocheted off the frame on the first attempt. Ron merely guffawed gloatingly and strode off into the Hall after him, but Harry caught Hermione's arm and held her back.

“What?” said Hermione defensively.

“If you ask me,” said Harry quietly, “McLaggen looks like he *was* Confunded this morning. And he was standing right in front of where you were sitting.”

Hermione blushed.

“Oh, all right then, I did it,” she whispered. “But you should have heard the way he was talking about Ron and Ginny! Anyway, he's got a nasty temper, you saw how he reacted when he didn't get in — you wouldn't have wanted someone like that on the team.”

“No,” said Harry. “No, I suppose that's true. But wasn't that dishonest, Hermione? I mean, you're a prefect, aren't you?”

“Oh, be quiet,” she snapped, as he smirked.

“What are you two doing?” demanded Ron, reappearing in the doorway to the Great Hall and looking suspicious.

“Nothing,” said Harry and Hermione together, and they hurried after Ron. The smell of roast beef made Harry's stomach ache with hunger, but they had barely taken three steps toward the Gryffindor table when Professor Slughorn appeared in front of them, blocking their path.

“Harry, Harry, just the man I was hoping to see!” he boomed genially, twiddling the ends of his walrus mustache and puffing out

his enormous belly. “I was hoping to catch you before dinner! What do you say to a spot of supper tonight in my rooms instead? We’re having a little party, just a few rising stars, I’ve got McLaggen coming and Zabini, the charming Melinda Bobbin — I don’t know whether you know her? Her family owns a large chain of apothecaries — and, of course, I hope very much that Miss Granger will favor me by coming too.”

Slughorn made Hermione a little bow as he finished speaking. It was as though Ron was not present; Slughorn did not so much as look at him.

“I can’t come, Professor,” said Harry at once. “I’ve got a detention with Professor Snape.”

“Oh dear!” said Slughorn, his face falling comically. “Dear, dear, I was counting on you, Harry! Well, now, I’ll just have to have a word with Severus and explain the situation. I’m sure I’ll be able to persuade him to postpone your detention. Yes, I’ll see you both later!”

He bustled away out of the Hall.

“He’s got no chance of persuading Snape,” said Harry, the moment Slughorn was out of earshot. “This detention’s already been postponed once; Snape did it for Dumbledore, but he won’t do it for anyone else.”

“Oh, I wish you could come, I don’t want to go on my own!” said Hermione anxiously; Harry knew that she was thinking about McLaggen.

“I doubt you’ll be alone, Ginny’ll probably be invited,” snapped Ron, who did not seem to have taken kindly to being ignored by

Slughorn.

After dinner they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower. The common room was very crowded, as most people had finished dinner by now, but they managed to find a free table and sat down; Ron, who had been in a bad mood ever since the encounter with Slughorn, folded his arms and frowned at the ceiling. Hermione reached out for a copy of the *Evening Prophet*, which somebody had left abandoned on a chair.

“Anything new?” said Harry.

“Not really . . .” Hermione had opened the newspaper and was scanning the inside pages. “Oh, look, your dad’s in here, Ron — he’s all right!” she added quickly, for Ron had looked around in alarm. “It just says he’s been to visit the Malfoys’ house. *‘This second search of the Death Eater’s residence does not seem to have yielded any results. Arthur Weasley of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects said that his team had been acting upon a confidential tip-off.’*”

“Yeah, mine!” said Harry. “I told him at King’s Cross about Malfoy and that thing he was trying to get Borgin to fix! Well, if it’s not at their house, he must have brought whatever it is to Hogwarts with him —”

“But how can he have done, Harry?” said Hermione, putting down the newspaper with a surprised look. “We were all searched when we arrived, weren’t we?”

“Were you?” said Harry, taken aback. “I wasn’t!”

“Oh no, of course you weren’t, I forgot you were late. . . . Well,

Filch ran over all of us with Secrecy Sensors when we got into the entrance hall. Any Dark object would have been found, I know for a fact Crabbe had a shrunken head confiscated. So you see, Malfoy can't have brought in anything dangerous!"

Momentarily stymied, Harry watched Ginny Weasley playing with Arnold the Pygmy Puff for a while before seeing a way around this objection.

"Someone's sent it to him by owl, then," he said. "His mother or someone."

"All the owls are being checked too," said Hermione. "Filch told us so when he was jabbing those Secrecy Sensors everywhere he could reach."

Really stumped this time, Harry found nothing else to say. There did not seem to be any way Malfoy could have brought a dangerous or Dark object into the school. He looked hopefully at Ron, who was sitting with his arms folded, staring over at Lavender Brown.

"Can you think of any way Malfoy — ?"

"Oh, drop it, Harry," said Ron.

"Listen, it's not my fault Slughorn invited Hermione and me to his stupid party, neither of us wanted to go, you know!" said Harry, firing up.

"Well, as I'm not invited to any parties," said Ron, getting to his feet again, "I think I'll go to bed."

He stomped off toward the door to the boys' dormitories, leaving Harry and Hermione staring after him.

"Harry?" said the new Chaser, Demelza Robins, appearing suddenly at his shoulder. "I've got a message for you."

“From Professor Slughorn?” asked Harry, sitting up hopefully.

“No . . . from Professor Snape,” said Demelza. Harry’s heart sank.

“He says you’re to come to his office at half past eight tonight to do your detention — er — no matter how many party invitations you’ve received. And he wanted you to know you’ll be sorting out rotten flobberworms from good ones, to use in Potions and — and he says there’s no need to bring protective gloves.”

“Right,” said Harry grimly. “Thanks a lot, Demelza.”

Hermione se Helpende hand

Soos wat Hermione voorspel het, is die sesdejaars se af-periodes nie die ure van salige ontspanning waarna Ron uitgesien het nie, maar tye waarin hulle moet probeer byhou met die yslike hoop huiswerk wat hulle kry. Hulle studeer nie net asof hulle elke dag eksamen skryf nie; die klasse self is boonop meer veeleisend as ooit voorheen. Harry verstaan skaars die helfte van wat professor McGonagall deesdae vir hulle sê; selfs Hermione moet haar vra om instruksies een of twee keer te herhaal. Tot almal se verbasing en Hermione se toenemende ontsteltenis is Harry se beste vak skielik Towerdrankies, danksy die Halfbloed Prins.

Daar word nou van hulle verwag om nieverbale towerspreuke te bemeester, nie net in Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste nie, maar ook in Towerspreuke en Transfigurasie. Harry kyk gereeld in die geselskamer of tydens etes na sy klasmaats en sien hul gesigte is pers en gepynig asof hulle 'n oordosis Poefa-Weer gedrink het, maar hy weet dit is eintlik omdat hulle sukkel om towerspreuke te laat werk sonder om die inkantasies hardop te sê. Dit is 'n verligting om buite in die kweekhuis te kom; in Kruiekunde kry hulle met gevaarliker plante as ooit tevore te doen, maar hulle mag ten minste hardop vloek as die Giftige Tentakula hulle onverwags van agter gryp.

Een gevolg van die enorme werkklas en die ure waarin hulle desperaat nieverbale towerspreuke oefen, is dat Harry, Ron en Hermione tot dusver nog nie tyd gehad het om vir Hagrid te gaan kuier nie. Hy kom nie meer etenstye by die personeeltafel aansit nie, wat 'n onheilspellende teken is, en die paar keer wat hulle in die gange of buite op die skoolgrond verby hom gestap het, het hy hulle vreemd genoeg nie raak gesien of hoor groet nie.

“Ons moet vir hom gaan verduidelik,” sê Hermione die volgende Saterdag met ontbyt terwyl sy na Hagrid se reuse leë stoel voor by die personeeltafel kyk.

“Dis vanoggend die Kwiddiek-proewe!” sê Ron. “En ons is veronderstel om daardie *Aguamenti*-towerspreuk vir Flitwick te oefen!

Wat moet ons in elk geval verduidelik? Hoe gaan ons vir hom sê ons het sy simpel vak gehaat?"

"Ons het dit nie gehaat nie!" sê Hermione.

"Wel, ek het. Ek het nog nie van daai Sputstertkrewels vergeet nie," sê Ron suur. "En ek sê jou nou, dit was 'n noue ontkoming. Jy het hom nie hoor aangaan oor sy idioot van 'n broer nie – as ons met sy vak aangegaan het, sou ons nog vir Ghrop moes leer hoe om sy skoenveters vas te maak."

"Ek haat dit om nie met Hagrid te praat nie," sê Hermione en lyk ontstig.

"Ons kan ná Kwiddiek afgaan soontoe," verseker Harry haar. Hy mis Hagrid ook, hoewel hy nes Ron dink hulle is beter daaraan toe sonder Ghrop in hul lewe. "Maar die proewe gaan dalk heeloggend vat, want baie mense het ingeskryf." Hy is effens senuagtig oor hierdie eerste uitdaging wat hom as kaptein in die gesig staar. "Ek weet nie hoekom almal ewe skielik in die span wil wees nie."

"Ag, komaan, Harry," sê Hermione skielik ongeduldig. "Dis nie die Kwiddiek wat gewild is nie; dis jy! Jy was nog nooit so interessant soos nou nie en, om eerlik te wees, jy was nog nooit so 'n gunsteling nie."

Ron verstik in 'n groot stuk gerookte haring. Hermione gee hom 'n minagterende kyk en draai dan terug na Harry.

"Almal weet nou jy het die waarheid vertel. Die hele towenaars-wêreld moes erken jy was reg oor Voldemort wat terug is en dat jy regtig die afgelope twee jaar twee keer teen hom geveg en albei kere weggekom het. En nou noem hulle jou die 'Uitverkorene' – jy behoort dus te kan sien hoekom mense gefassineerd is deur jou!"

Dit voel skielik vir Harry baie warm in die Groot Saal, al lyk die plafon nog steeds koud en reënerig.

"En jy's deur al daai vervolging van die Ministerie toe hulle probeer maak het of jy onstabiel is en leuens vertel. Mens kan nog die merke sien waar daai bouse vrou jou gedwing het om met jou eie bloed te skryf, maar jy het nogtans nie kopgegee nie ..."

"Mens kan nog steeds sien waar daai breine my in die Ministerie beetgekry het. Kyk," sê Ron en stoot sy moue op.

"En beste van alles is, jy't dié somer omtrent 'n voet langer geword," maak Hermione klaar terwyl sy Ron ignoreer.

"Ek is lank," sê Ron onlogies.

Die posuile daag op. Hulle duik uit die reën deur die vensters in binnetoe en spat almal vol waterdruppels. Die meeste mense kry meer pos as gewoonlik; besorgde ouers is angstig om van hul kinders te hoor en om hulle op hul beurt gerus te stel dat dit goed gaan

by die huis. Harry het hierdie kwartaal nog niks pos gekry nie; sy enigste gereelde korrespondent is nou dood en hoewel hy gehoop het Lupin sal af en toe skryf, het dit tot dusver tot sy teleurstelling nog nie gebeur nie. Daarom is hy baie verras om die sneeuwit Hedwig tussen al die bruin en grys uile bokant hulle te sien rond-sirkel. Sy land voor hom met 'n groot vierkantige pakkie. 'n Oomblik later beland 'n identiese pakkie, wat sy klein en uitgeputte uiltjie Pigwidgeon heeltemal daaronder platdruk, voor Ron.

"Ha!" sê Harry toe hy die pakkie oopmaak en 'n nuwe eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* van Sierskrif en Klatt, uithaal.

"A, goed so," sê Hermione verheug. "Nou kan jy daai ou graffiti-eksemplaar teruggee."

"Is jy mal?" sê Harry. "Ek gaan hom hou! Ek het dit mooi uit-gewerk —"

Hy haal die ou eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* uit sy sak, tik met sy towerstaf teen die omslag en mompel "*Diffendo!*" Die omslag val af. Hy doen dieselfde met die splinternuwe boek (Hermione lyk verontwaardig). Dan ruil hy die omslae om, tik teen elkeen en sê "*Reparo!*"

Daar lê die Prins se eksemplaar, vermom as 'n nuwe boek, en langs hom lê die vars eksemplaar van Sierskrif en Klatt en lyk baie tweedehands.

"Ek sal die nuwe een vir Slughorn teruggee. Hy kan nie kla nie; dit kos nege Galjoene."

Hermione pers haar lippe saam en lyk kwaad en afkeurend, maar haar aandag word afgelei deur 'n derde uil wat voor hulle land met die dag se uitgawe van die *Daaglikse Profeet*. Sy vou dit dadelik oop en lees vlugtig wat die voorblad sê.

"Enigiemand wat ons ken dood?" vra Ron gemaak onverskillig. Hy vra elke keer dat Hermione haar koerant begin lees dieselfde vraag.

"Nee, maar daar was nog Dementor-aanvalle," sê Hermione. "En 'n arrestasie."

"Uitstekend. Wie?" vra Harry terwyl hy aan Bellatrix Lestrange dink.

"Stan Shunpike," sê Hermione.

"Wat?" sê Harry geskok.

"Stanley Shunpike, kondukteur op die gewilde towervervoermiddel, die Nagtelike Ridderbus, is gearresteer weens verdagte Doodseter-aktiwiteite. Meneer Shunpike, 21, is laat gisteraand in hegtenis geneem ná 'n klopjag op sy huis in Clapham ..."

"Stan Shunpike 'n Doodseter?" sê Harry en onthou die jong man vol puisies wat hy drie jaar gelede die eerste keer ontmoet het. "On-moontlik!"

“Dalk is hy onder die Imperiusvloek,” sê Ron billikerwys. “Jy weet nooit.”

“Dit lyk nie so nie,” sê Hermione, wat nog steeds lees. “Hulle sê hier hy’s gearreesteer nadat iemand hom in ’n kroeg oor die Doodseters se geheime planne hoor praat het.” Sy kyk bekommerd op. “As hy onder die Imperiusvloek was, sou hy definitief nie oor hul planne gestaan en skinder het nie, sou hy?”

“Dit klink of hy probeer maak het of hy meer weet as wat hy regtig weet,” sê Ron. “Was dit nie hy wat gesê het hy gaan die Minister van Towerkuns word toe hy by daardie Veela aangelê het nie?”

“Ja, dit was hy,” sê Harry. “Ek weet nie vir wat hulle Stan so ernstig opneem nie.”

“Hulle wil seker hê dit moet lyk of hulle iets doen,” sê Hermione fronsend. “Mense is doodbang – weet julle die Patil-tweeling se ouers wil hê hulle moet huis toe kom? En Eloise Midgeon is al klaar uit die skool. Haar pa het haar gisteraand kom haal.”

“Wat?!” sê Ron en rol sy oë vir Hermione. “Maar Hogwarts is veiliger as hul huise; baie veiliger! Ons het Aurors en al daai ekstra beskermende towerspreuke, en ons het vir Dumbledore!”

“Ek dink nie ons het hom die hele tyd nie,” sê Hermione baie saggies en loer bo-oor die Profeet na die personeeltafel. “Het julle nog nie agtergekom nie? Sy stoel is die afgelope week byna net so dikwels soos Hagrid s’n leeg.”

Harry en Ron kyk op na die personeeltafel. Die Skoolhoof se stoel is inderdaad leeg. Noudat Harry daaraan dink, besef hy hy het Dumbledore nog nie weer sedert hul privaat les ’n week gelede gesien nie.

“Ek dink die feit dat hy nie hier is nie het iets met die Orde te doen,” sê Hermione in ’n lae stem. “Ek bedoel ... daar’s groot moeilikheid, of hoe?”

Harry en Ron antwoord nie, maar Harry weet hulle dink almal aan dieselfde ding. Daar was die vorige dag ’n aaklige insident. Hannah Abbot is uit die Kruiekundeklas kom haal om vir haar te sê haar ma is dood aangetref. Hulle het Hannah sedertdien nog nie weer gesien nie.

Toe hulle die Gryffindor-tafel vyf minute later verlaat om na die Kwiddiekveld te gaan, loop hulle verby Lavender Brown en Parvati Patil. Harry onthou wat Hermione gesê het van die tweeling wie se ouers hulle by Hogwarts wil wegneem; daarom verbaas dit hom nie om te sien hoe die twee beste vriendinne onrustig saam loop en fluister nie. Wat hom wel verbaas, is dat Parvati skielik aan Lavender stamp toe Ron langs hulle kom. Lavender kyk na Ron en

glimlag breed vir hom. Ron se oë rek en dan glimlag hy onseker terug. Skielik stap hy soos 'n windmaker pou. Harry weerstaan die versoeking om te lag, want hy onthou Ron het nie vir hom gelag toe Malfoy sy neus gebreek het nie, maar Hermione bly heelpad tot onder by die stadion koud en op 'n afstand en gaan soek vir haar sitplek op die pawiljoen sonder om Ron voorspoed toe te wens.

Soos wat Harry verwag het, duur die proewe omtrent heeloggend. Die helfte van Gryffindor-huis het opgedaag, van eerstejaars wat senuweeagtig aan 'n verskeidenheid aaklige ou skoolbeseems vasklou tot sewendejaars wat intimiderend bo die ander uittoon. Een van laasgenoemde is 'n groot seun met stekelhare wat Harry dadelik van die Hogwarts Express af herken.

“Ons het op die trein ontmoet, in ou Slakkie se kompartement,” sê hy selfversekerd en tree vorentoe om Harry se hand te skud. “Cormac McLaggen, Wagter.”

“Jy het nie laas jaar in die proewe gespeel nie, het jy?” vra Harry, wat nou opmerk hoe breed McLaggen is en besef hy sal heel moontlik al drie doelhoepels kan beskerm sonder om eens te beweeg.

“Ek was daai tyd in die siekeboeg,” sê McLaggen grootdoenerig. “Ek het 'n pond se Doxie-eiers geëet, vir 'n weddenskap.”

“Reg,” sê Harry. “Wel ... gaan wag asseblief daar ...”

Hy wys na die punt van die veld, naby aan waar Hermione sit. Hy verbeel hom hy sien 'n flikkering van ergernis op McLaggen se gesig en wonder of McLaggen voorkeurbehandeling verwag omdat hulle albei van “ou Slakkie” se gunsteling is.

Harry besluit om met 'n basiese toets te begin. Hy vra al die aspirantspanlede om in groepe van tien te verdeel en een keer om die veld te vlieg. Dit is 'n goeie besluit: die eerste tien bestaan uit eerstejaars en dit is duidelik dat hulle beswaarlik al vroeër gevlieg het. Net een seun kry dit reg om langer as 'n paar sekondes in die lug te bly en hy is so verbaas dat hy summier in een van die doelpale vasvlieg.

Die tweede groep bestaan uit tien van die verspotste meisies wat Harry nog ooit teëgekom het. Toe hy op sy fluit blaas, val hulle net giggelend rond en klou aan mekaar vas; Romilda Vane is een van hulle. Harry vra hulle uiteindelik om die veld te verlaat en hulle gaan sit doodgelukkig op die pawiljoen en begin al die ander mense irriteer.

Die derde groep jaag halfpad om die veld in mekaar vas en die meeste van die vierde groep het sonder besemstokke opgedaag. Die vyfde groep is Hoesenproesers.

“Enigiemand anders hier wat nie in Gryffindor is nie,” bulder Harry, wat nou al lelik omgekras is, “gee asseblief nou dadelik pad!”

Daar is 'n oomblik stilte en dan kies 'n paar klein Raweklouers laggend die hasepad.

Ná twee uur, baie klagtes en verskeie insidente, waaronder 'n gebreekte Komeet Twee-Sestig en 'n hele paar gekraakte tande, het Harry uiteindelik drie Jaers: Katie Bell, terug in die span nadat sy uitstekend in die proewe gevaar het, Demelza Robins, wat Mokers besonder goed ontglip, en Ginny Weasley, wat onder almal uitgevlieg en boonop sewentien doele aangeteken het. Harry is tevrede met sy keuses, maar hy is hees van skree op almal wat by hom kom kla en is juis nou weer in die middel van nog so 'n woordewisseling met die Brekers wat hy afgekeur het.

“Dis my finale besluit en as julle nie nou uit die Wagter se pad kom nie, toor ek julle!” bulder hy.

Nie een van sy nuwe Brekers is so briljant soos Fred en George nie, maar hy is nogtans heel tevrede met hulle: Jimmy Peakes, 'n kort maar breëbors derdejaar wie se woeste Moker 'n knop so groot soos 'n eier teen Harry se agterkop agtergelaat het en Ritchie Coote, wat skraal lyk maar goed mik. Hulle sluit nou by Katie, Ginny en Demelza op die pawiljoen aan om te kyk hoe hul laaste spanlid gekies word.

Harry het die proewe vir die Wagters opsetlik tot laaste gehou, in die hoop dat die pawiljoen al leër sal wees sodat daar minder druk op al die deelnemers is. Maar ongelukkig het al die afgekeurde spelers en 'n klompie mense wat ná 'n uitgerekte ontbyt aangekom het, by die ander aangesluit en daar is nou 'n groter skare as vroeër. Soos wat elke Wagter na die doelhoepels opvlieg, brul en jou die skare met ewe veel oorgawe. Harry kyk na Ron, wie se senuwees hom nog altyd gedwarsboom het; Harry het gehoop die feit dat hulle hul laaste wedstryd laas jaar danksy hom gewen het, sou Ron daarvan genees, maar blykbaar het dit nie: Ron is 'n delikate skakering van groen.

Nie een van die eerste vyf aspirante kry dit reg om meer as twee doele elk af te weer nie. Tot Harry se groot teleurstelling keer Cormac McLaggen vier van die vyf strafskote. Met die laaste een swenk hy egter heeltemal in die verkeerde rigting; die skare lag en boe en McLaggen kom met knersende tande terug grond toe.

Ron klim op sy Skoonskip Elf en lyk of hy gaan omkap.

“Sterkte!” gil 'n stem van die pawiljoen af. Harry kyk om en verwag om Hermione te sien, maar dit was Lavender Brown. Hy sou graag sy gesig in sy hande wou wegsteek soos wat sy 'n oomblik later doen, maar hy voel as kaptein behoort hy ietwat meer durf aan die dag te lê en draai om sodat hy kan sien hoe Ron vaar.

Maar hy was verniet bekommerd: Ron keer een, twee, drie, vier, vyf doelskote op 'n ry. Verheug weerstaan Harry die versoeking om Ron saam met die skare toe te juig; hy draai na McLaggen om vir hom te sê hy is jammer, maar Ron het hom uitgestof. McLaggen se rooi gesig is egter reeds vyf duim van syne af en Harry gee haastig 'n tree terug.

“Sy suster het nie regtig probeer nie,” sê McLaggen dreigend. Daar klop 'n aar teen sy slaap soos die een wat Harry al so dikwels by oom Vernon bewonder het. “Sy't vir hom een maklike keerslag gegee.”

“Nonsens,” sê Harry koud. “Dis die een wat hy amper gemis het.”

McLaggen gee 'n tree vorentoe, maar hierdie keer retireer Harry nie.

“Gee my nog 'n kans.”

“Nee,” sê Harry. “Jy't jou kans gehad. Jy't vier gekeer. Ron het vyf gekeer. Ron is die Wagter; hy het dit verdien. Uit my pad uit.”

Hy dink vir 'n oomblik McLaggen gaan hom met die vuus bydam, maar die kêrel trek net 'n lelike gesig en storm daar weg terwyl hy iets grom wat soos 'n ydele dreigement klink.

Harry draai om en sy nuwe span kyk hom stralend aan.

“Mooi so,” sê hy hees. “Julle het regtig goed gevlieg –”

“Jy was briljant, Ron!”

Hierdie keer is dit inderdaad Hermione wat van die pawiljoen af na hulle aangehardloop kom; Harry sien hoe Lavender, ingehaak by Parvati, met 'n taamlike nors uitdrukking op haar gesig wegloop. Ron lyk baie in sy noppies met homself en selfs nog langer as gewoonlik terwyl hy vir die span en Hermione grinnik.

Hulle spreek af hoe laat hulle volgende Donderdag hul eerste volledige oefensessie gaan hê en dan sê Harry, Ron en Hermione vir die res van die span tot siens en kry koers na Hagrid se plek toe. 'n Waterige sonnetjie probeer nou deur die wolke breek en die stuifreën hou uiteindelik op. Harry is geweldig honger; hy hoop Hagrid gaan vir hulle iets te ete hê.

“Ek dog ek gaan daai vierde strafhou mis,” sê Ron vrolik. “Bedrieglike hou van Demelza, het julle gesien; bietjie van 'n draaibal –”

“Ja, ja, jy was ongelooflik,” sê Hermione en lyk geamuseerd.

“Ek was in elk geval beter as daai McLaggen,” sê Ron, baie tevrede met homself. “Het julle gesien hoe foeter hy in die verkeerde rigting met sy vyfde een? Gelyk of hy met 'n Warvloek gelooi is ...”

Tot Harry se verbasing word Hermione se gesig skielik donkerpienk. Ron merk niks op nie; hy is te besig om elkeen van sy ander keerslae in liefdevolle detail te beskryf.

Die groot grys Hippogrief, Bokbok, is voor Hagrid se hut vasge-

maak. Toe hulle nader kom, maak hy klikgeluide met sy vlymskerp bek en draai sy groot kop na hulle toe.

“O aarde,” sê Hermione senuagtig. “Hy is nog steeds angswekkend.”

“Moenie simpel wees nie. Jy’t dan al op hom gery,” sê Ron.

Harry kom vorentoe en buig laag voor die Hippogrief sonder om oogkontak te verloor of sy oë te knip. Ná ’n paar sekondes buig Bokbok ook.

“Hoe gaan dit met jou?” vra Harry in ’n lae stem en beweeg nader om die geveerde kop te streel. “Jy mis hom, nè? Maar jy’s oukei hier by Hagrid, of hoe?”

“Hei!” sê ’n harde stem.

Hagrid kom met lang tree om die hoek van sy hut aangestap. Hy het ’n groot blommetjiesvoorskoot aan en dra ’n sak aartappels. Sy enorme beerhond, Tande, volg op sy hakke; Tande blaf bulderend en spring vorentoe.

“Bly weg van hom! Hy sal julle vingers af- ... O, dis julle.”

Tande spring teen Hermione en Ron op en probeer hul ore lek. Hagrid kyk vir ’n oomblik na hulle, draai dan om, loop by sy hut in en klap die deur agter hom toe.

“O aarde!” sê Hermione en lyk verslae.

“Toemaar,” sê Harry stug. Hy loop na die deur en klop hard. “Hagrid! Maak oop; ons wil met jou praat!”

Daar kom nie ’n geluid van binne af nie.

“As jy nie die deur oopmaak nie gaan ons dit oopblaas!” sê Harry en haal sy towerstaf uit.

“Harry!” gil Hermione. “Jy kan onmoontlik nie –”

“Ja, ek kan!” sê Harry “Staan terug –”

Maar voor hy enigiets anders kan sê, soos Harry geweet het, vlieg die deur oop en daar staan Hagrid. Hy gluur neer op Harry en lyk ten spyte van die blommetjiesvoorskoot vreesaanjaend.

“Ek’s ’n onderwyser!” brul hy vir Harry. “’n Onderwyser, Potter! Hoe durf jy dreig om my deur af te breek?!”

“Ek is jammer, *meneer*,” sê Harry en beklemtoon die laaste woord terwyl hy sy towerstaf in sy kleed terugsit.

Hagrid lyk dronkgeslaan.

“Van wanneer af noem jy my ‘meneer?’”

“Van wanneer af noem jy my ‘Potter?’”

“Ba, baie slim,” grom Hagrid. “Baie snaaks. My al weer uitoorlê, hè? Orraaait, kom dan maar in, julle ondankbare klein ...”

Hy staan al mompelend opsy sodat hulle kan inkom. Hermione skarrel agter Harry in en lyk taamluk bang.

“Wel?” wil Hagrid knorrig weet. Harry, Ron en Hermione gaan sit by sy enorme houttafel en Tande kom sit dadelik sy kop op Harry se knie en kwyl sy hele toga vol. “Wassit? Voel julle jammer vir my? Dink ek is eensaam of iets?”

“Nee,” sê Harry dadelik. “Ons wou jou sien.”

“Ons het jou gemis!” sê Hermione bewurig.

“My gemis, hè?” snork Hagrid. “Ja. Reg.”

Hy loop vies rond, brou tee in sy ontsaglike groot koperketel en brom heeltyd by homself. Uiteindelik plak hy drie emmergroot bakers met mahoniebruin tee en ’n bord met sy rotskoekies voor hulle neer. Harry is honger genoeg om selfs Hagrid se gebak te eet, en vat dadelik een.

“Hagrid,” sê Hermione skugter toe hy ook by die tafel kom sit en sy aartappels begin skil met ’n brutaliteit wat te kenne gee dat elke knol hom ’n groot persoonlike onreg aangedoen het, “ons wou regtig graag met Versorging van Magiese Kreature aangegaan het, weet jy.”

Hagrid snork weer hard en verontwaardig. Harry is seker daar het ’n paar goggas op die aartappels beland en is in die stilligheid dankbaar hulle gaan nie vir aandete bly nie.

“Ons wou regtig!” gaan Hermione aan. “Maar nie een van ons kon dit op ons roosters ingepas kry nie!”

“Ja. Reg,” sê Hagrid weer.

Daar is ’n snaakse plasgeluid en hulle kyk almal om: Hermione gee ’n gilletjie en Ron spring uit sy stoel op en wip om die tafel om weg te kom van die groot balie in die hoek wat hulle nou eers raak sien. Dit is vol goed wat lyk soos voet lange wurms; slymerig, wit en wriemelend.

“Wat is dit?” vra Harry en probeer belangstellend klink en nie gewalg nie terwyl hy sy rotskoekie nietemin neersit.

“Dis net reusewurms,” sê Hagrid.

“En wat word hulle as hulle groot is?” vra Ron versigtig.

“Hulle word nie groot nie,” sê Hagrid. “Ek het hulle gekry om vir Aragog te voer.”

En sonder waarskuwing bars hy in trane uit.

“Hagrid!” roep Hermione uit. Sy spring op, beweeg vinnig met die lang pad om die tafel sodat sy die balie wurms kan vermy en sit een arm om sy rukkende skouers. “Wat is dit?”

“Dis ... hy ...” snak Hagrid. Die trane stroom uit sy kewerswart oë terwyl hy sy gesig met sy voorskoot afvee. “Dis ... Aragog ... Ek dink hy’s besig om dood te gaan ... Hy’t in die somer siek geraak en hy word nie beter nie ... Ek weet nie wat ek sal doen as hy ... as hy... ons is al so lankal saam ...”

Hermione klop Hagrid op die skouer en lyk of sy glad nie weet wat om te sê nie. Harry weet hoe sy voel. Hy het al gesien hoe Hagrid vir 'n geniepsige babadrakie 'n teddiebeer present gee, hoe hy kloek om reuseskerpioene met suiers en angels, hoe hy met sy yslike reus van 'n halfbroer probeer redeneer, maar dít is waarskynlik die onverstaanbaarste van al sy monsterliefdes: die reusagtige, pratende spinnekop, Aragog, wat diep in die Verbode Woud bly en uit wie se kloue hy en Ron vier jaar gelede ternouernood ontsnap het.

“Is daar – is daar enigiets wat ons kan doen?” vra Hermione en ignoreer Ron wat vreeslik gesigte trek en sy kop skud.

“Ek dink nie so nie, Hermione,” snik Hagrid en probeer vergeefs om sy tranenvloed te keer. “Sien jy, die res van die stam ... Aragog se familie ... Hulle raak bietjie snaaks nou dat hy siek is ... bietjie kriewelrig ...”

“Ja, ek dink ons het iets van daardie sy van hulle gesien,” sê Ron gedemp.

“... Ek dink nie dis veilig vir enigiemand behalwe ek om op die oomblik naby daai spulletjie te gaan nie,” eindig Hagrid. Hy snuit sy neus hard met sy voorskoot en kyk dan op. “Maar dankie dat jy aangebied het, Hermione ... Dit beteken vir my baie ...”

Die atmosfeer is nou heelwat ligter, want hoewel nie Harry of Ron enige aanduiding gegee het dat hulle vir die kolossale, moordlustige spinnekop reusewurms wil gaan voer nie, het Hagrid dit blykbaar as vanselfsprekend aanvaar dat hulle graag sou wou en hy word dus weer sy gewone self.

“Ag, ek het geweet julle sal sukkel om my op julle roosters in te druk,” sê hy stroef en skink vir hulle nog tee. “Selfs al het julle vir Tyddraaiers aansoek gedoen –”

“Ons kan nie,” sê Hermione. “Ons het die Ministerie se hele voorraad Tyddraaiers vernietig toe ons dié somer daar was. Dit was in die *Daaglikse Profeet*.”

“Ag, orraait dan,” sê Hagrid. “Ek weet julle kan nie ... Ek is jammer ek was – julle weet – ek was net bietjie benoud oor Aragog ... en ek het gewonder of julle dalk sou aangegaan het as professor Grubbly-Plank nog hier was –”

Al drie van hulle verklaar dadelik kategorieë en valslik dat professor Grubbly-Plank, wat Hagrid 'n paar keer vervang het, 'n aaklige onderwyser was, met die gevolg dat Hagrid teen skemer baie vrolik is toe hy vir hulle tot siens waai.

“Ek's dood van die honger,” sê Harry sodra die deur agter hulle toe is en hulle vinnig oor die donker, verlate skoolgrond begin

aanstap; hy het die rotskoekie finaal neergesit ná een van sy agter-tande 'n gevaarlike kraakgeluid gemaak het. "En ek het vanaand detensie by Snape; ek het nie baie tyd oor vir aandete nie ..."

Hulle stap by die kasteel in en sien Cormac McLaggen by die Groot Saal ingaan. Hy kom eers ná twee pogings by die deure in nadat hy hom die eerste keer byna katswink teen die kosyn geloop het. Ron lag van lekkerkry en loop agter hom by die saal in, maar Harry kry Hermione aan die arm beet en hou haar terug.

"Wat's dit?" vra Hermione, dadelik op die verdediging.

"As jy my vra," sê Harry sag, "is McLaggen met 'n Warvloek gelooi. En hy't reg voor jou gestaan."

Hermione bloos.

"Nou goed dan, ek het dit gedoen," fluister sy. "Maar jy moes gehoor het hoe praat hy van Ron en Ginny! In elk geval, hy't 'n vieslike humeur; jy't gesien hoe reageer hy toe hy nie die span haal nie – jy wil tog nie so iemand in jou span hê nie."

"Nee," sê Harry. "Nee, dis seker waar. Maar was dit nie oneerlik nie, Hermione? Ek bedoel, jy's 'n prefek, nie waar nie?"

"Ag, bly stil," snou sy hom toe terwyl hy spottend lag.

"Wat maak julle twee?" vra Ron, wat weer in die Groot Saal se deuropening verskyn en agterdogtig lyk.

"Niks," sê Harry en Hermione gelyk en volg hom haastig. Die reuk van gebraaide beesvleis laat Harry se maag van honger pyn, maar hulle het skaars drie tree in die rigting van die Gryffindor-tafel gegee toe professor Slughorn voor hulle opdoem en hul pad versper.

"Harry, Harry, net die man wat ek gehoop het om te sien!" basuin hy gemoedelik uit. Hy speel met die punte van sy walrussnor en stoot sy enorme maag uit. "Ek het gehoop ek sal jou voor ete raakloop! Wat sê jy van aandete in my kamers? Ons hou 'n klein partytjie, net 'n paar opkomende sterre. McLaggen kom, en Zabini, die sjarmante Melinda Bobbin – ek weet nie of jy haar ken nie? Haar familie besit groot farmakoteek-kettingwinkels – en ek hoop natuurlik juffrou Granger sal my ook met haar teenwoordigheid vereer."

Slughorn maak 'n buiginkie vir Hermione toe hy klaar gepraat het. Dit is asof Ron glad nie teenwoordig is nie; Slughorn kyk nie eens na hom nie.

"Ek kan nie kom nie, professor," sê Harry dadelik. "Ek het detensie by professor Snape."

"O land!" sê Slughorn en sy gesig val komieklik. "Liewe, liewe land; ek het regtig op jou gereken, Harry! Wel, dan sal ek eenvoudig 'n woordjie met Severus moet wissel en die situasie aan hom

verduidelik. Ek is seker ek sal hom kan ompraat om jou detensie uit te stel. Reg, sien julle twee dan later!”

Hy haas hom by die saal uit.

“Daar’s nie ’n kans dat hy Snape sal ompraat nie,” sê Harry die oomblik dat Slughorn buite hoorafstand is. “Hierdie detensie is al klaar een keer uitgestel; Snape het dit vir Dumbledore gedoen, maar hy sal dit vir niemand anders doen nie.”

“Ai, ek wens jy kan kom. Ek wil nie op my eie gaan nie!” sê Hermione benoud en Harry weet sy dink aan McLaggen.

“Jy sal nie alleen wees nie. Ginny is seker ook genooi,” blaf Ron, wat duidelik ongelukkig is omdat Slughorn hom so geïgnoreer het.

Ná aandete stap hulle terug na die Gryffindor-toring. Die geselskamer is stampvol, want die meeste mense het nou al klaar geëet, maar hulle kry ’n oop tafel en gaan sit. Ron, wat nog steeds in ’n slegte bui is ná die voorval met Slughorn, vou sy arms en kyk fronsend na die plafon. Hermione tel ’n eksemplaar van die *Aandprofeet* wat iemand op ’n stoel laat lê het, op.

“Enigiets nuuts?” vra Harry.

“Nie regtig nie ...” Hermione vou die koerant oop en kyk vlugtig wat binne-in staan. “O kyk, hier praat hulle van jou pa, Ron – Toemaar, hy’s oukei!” voeg sy vinnig by om Ron gerus te stel. “Dit sê net hier dat hy die Malfoys se huis besoek het. *‘Die tweede klopjag op die Doodseter se woning het blykbaar geen resultate opgelewer nie. Volgens Arthur Weasley van die Kantoor vir die Opsporing en Konfiskering van Vervalste Verdedigingspaljasse en Talismans het sy span na aanleiding van ’n vertroulike wenk opgetree.’*”

“Ja, my wenk!” sê Harry. “Ek het hom by King’s Cross vertel van Malfoy en van daai ding wat hy wou hê Borgin moes regmaak! Wel, as dit nie in hul huis is nie, moes hy wat dit ook al is saam met hom Hogwarts toe gebring het –”

“Maar hoe kon hy, Harry?” vra Hermione en sit die koerant met ’n verbaasde uitdrukking neer. “Ons is almal deursoek toe ons hier aangekom het.”

“Is julle?” vra Harry verbaas. “Ek is nie!”

“Nee, natuurlik is jy nie. Ek het vergeet jy was laat ... Wel, Filch het ons almal deeglik met sy Soeksensors gevisenteer toe ons by die Ingangsportaal instap. Daai goed tel enige Donker voorwerp op; ek weet vir ’n feit hy het ’n gekrimpte kop by Crabbe gekonfiskeer. So jy sien, Malfoy kon niks gevaarliks ingebring het nie!”

Harry dink vir ’n oomblik na terwyl hy kyk hoe Ginny Weasley met Arnold die Pigmee Poffie speel en kry dan ’n teenvoeter vir hierdie beswaar.

“Iemand moes dit vir hom met uilepos gestuur het,” sê hy. “Sy ma of iemand.”

“Al die uile word ook deursoek,” sê Hermione. “Filch het vir ons gesê al wat leef en beef gaan onder sy Soeksensors deurloop.”

Harry is nou regtig raadop en weet nie wat om te sê nie. Hy kan nie dink aan enige ander manier waarop Malfoy 'n gevaarlike of Donker voorwerp by die skool kon inbring nie. Hy soek hulp by Ron, wat arms gevou na Lavender Brown sit en staar.

“Kan jy dink aan 'n ander manier waarop Malfoy – ?”

“Man, los dit nou, Harry,” sê Ron.

“Luister, dis nie my skuld dat Slughorn my en Hermione na sy simpel partytjie toe genooi het nie. Nie een van ons wil in elk geval gaan nie!” sê Harry skielik vurig.

“Wel, aangesien ek nie na enige partytjies toe genooi is nie,” sê Ron en kom weer op die been, “gaan ek bed toe.”

Hy loop nors na die deur wat na die seuns se slaapsale lei terwyl Harry en Hermione hom agterna staar.

“Harry?” sê die nuwe Jaer, Demelza Robins, wat skielik by sy skouer verskyn. “Ek het 'n boodskap vir jou.”

“Van professor Slughorn?” vra Harry en sit hoopvol regop.

“Nee ... van professor Snape,” sê Demelza. Harry se moed sak in sy skoene. “Hy sê jy moet halfnege vanaand na sy kantoor toe kom vir detensie – e – maak nie saak hoeveel partytjie-uitnodigings jy gekry het nie. En hy sê jy gaan gesonde Flobberwurms tussen vrottes uitsorteer om in Towerdrankies te gebruik en – en hy sê jy hoef nie beskermende handskoene saam te bring nie.”

“Reg,” sê Harry stroef. “Baie dankie, Demelza.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



SILVER AND OPALS

Where was Dumbledore, and what was he doing? Harry caught sight of the headmaster only twice over the next few weeks. He rarely appeared at meals anymore, and Harry was sure Hermione was right in thinking that he was leaving the school for days at a time. Had Dumbledore forgotten the lessons he was supposed to be giving Harry? Dumbledore had said that the lessons were leading to something to do with the prophecy; Harry had felt bolstered, comforted, and now he felt slightly abandoned.

Halfway through October came their first trip of the term to Hogsmeade. Harry had wondered whether these trips would still be

allowed, given the increasingly tight security measures around the school, but was pleased to know that they were going ahead; it was always good to get out of the castle grounds for a few hours.

Harry woke early on the morning of the trip, which was proving stormy, and whiled away the time until breakfast by reading his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. He did not usually lie in bed reading his textbooks; that sort of behavior, as Ron rightly said, was indecent in anybody except Hermione, who was simply weird that way. Harry felt, however, that the Half-Blood Prince's copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* hardly qualified as a textbook. The more Harry pored over the book, the more he realized how much was in there, not only the handy hints and shortcuts on potions that were earning him such a glowing reputation with Slughorn, but also the imaginative little jinxes and hexes scribbled in the margins, which Harry was sure, judging by the crossings-out and revisions, that the Prince had invented himself.

Harry had already attempted a few of the Prince's self-invented spells. There had been a hex that caused toenails to grow alarmingly fast (he had tried this on Crabbe in the corridor, with very entertaining results); a jinx that glued the tongue to the roof of the mouth (which he had twice used, to general applause, on an unsuspecting Argus Filch); and, perhaps most useful of all, *Muffliato*, a spell that filled the ears of anyone nearby with an unidentifiable buzzing, so that lengthy conversations could be held in class without being overheard. The only person who did not find these charms amusing was Hermione, who maintained a rigidly disapproving expression throughout and refused to talk at all if Harry had used the

Muffliato spell on anyone in the vicinity.

Sitting up in bed, Harry turned the book sideways so as to examine more closely the scribbled instructions for a spell that seemed to have caused the Prince some trouble. There were many crossings-out and alterations, but finally, crammed into a corner of the page, the scribble:

Levicorpus (nvbl)

While the wind and sleet pounded relentlessly on the windows, and Neville snored loudly, Harry stared at the letters in brackets. *Nvbl* . . . that had to mean “nonverbal.” Harry rather doubted he would be able to bring off this particular spell; he was still having difficulty with nonverbal spells, something Snape had been quick to comment on in every D.A.D.A. class. On the other hand, the Prince had proved a much more effective teacher than Snape so far.

Pointing his wand at nothing in particular, he gave it an upward flick and said *Levicorpus!* inside his head.

“Aaaaaaaaargh!”

There was a flash of light and the room was full of voices: Everyone had woken up as Ron had let out a yell. Harry sent *Advanced Potion-Making* flying in panic; Ron was dangling upside down in midair as though an invisible hook had hoisted him up by the ankle.

“Sorry!” yelled Harry, as Dean and Seamus roared with laughter, and Neville picked himself up from the floor, having fallen out of bed. “Hang on — I’ll let you down —”

He groped for the potion book and riffled through it in a panic,

trying to find the right page; at last he located it and deciphered one cramped word underneath the spell: Praying that this was the counter-jinx, Harry thought *Liberacorpus!* with all his might.

There was another flash of light, and Ron fell in a heap onto his mattress.

“Sorry,” repeated Harry weakly, while Dean and Seamus continued to roar with laughter.

“Tomorrow,” said Ron in a muffled voice, “I’d rather you set the alarm clock.”

By the time they had got dressed, padding themselves out with several of Mrs. Weasley’s hand-knitted sweaters and carrying cloaks, scarves, and gloves, Ron’s shock had subsided and he had decided that Harry’s new spell was highly amusing; so amusing, in fact, that he lost no time in regaling Hermione with the story as they sat down for breakfast.

“. . . and then there was another flash of light and I landed on the bed again!” Ron grinned, helping himself to sausages.

Hermione had not cracked a smile during this anecdote, and now turned an expression of wintry disapproval upon Harry.

“Was this spell, by any chance, another one from that potion book of yours?” she asked.

Harry frowned at her.

“Always jump to the worst conclusion, don’t you?”

“Was it?”

“Well . . . yeah, it was, but so what?”

“So you just decided to try out an unknown, handwritten incantation and see what would happen?”

“Why does it matter if it’s handwritten?” said Harry, preferring not to answer the rest of the question.

“Because it’s probably not Ministry of Magic–approved,” said Hermione. “And also,” she added, as Harry and Ron rolled their eyes, “because I’m starting to think this Prince character was a bit dodgy.”

Both Harry and Ron shouted her down at once.

“It was a laugh!” said Ron, upending a ketchup bottle over his sausages. “Just a laugh, Hermione, that’s all!”

“Dangling people upside down by the ankle?” said Hermione. “Who puts their time and energy into making up spells like that?”

“Fred and George,” said Ron, shrugging, “it’s their kind of thing. And, er —”

“My dad,” said Harry. He had only just remembered.

“What?” said Ron and Hermione together.

“My dad used this spell,” said Harry. “I — Lupin told me.”

This last part was not true; in fact, Harry had seen his father use the spell on Snape, but he had never told Ron and Hermione about that particular excursion into the Pensieve. Now, however, a wonderful possibility occurred to him. Could the Half-Blood Prince possibly be — ?

“Maybe your dad did use it, Harry,” said Hermione, “but he’s not the only one. We’ve seen a whole bunch of people use it, in case you’ve forgotten. Dangling people in the air. Making them float along, asleep, helpless.”

Harry stared at her. With a sinking feeling, he too remembered the behavior of the Death Eaters at the Quidditch World Cup. Ron came

to his aid.

“That was different,” he said robustly. “They were abusing it. Harry and his dad were just having a laugh. You don’t like the Prince, Hermione,” he added, pointing a sausage at her sternly, “because he’s better than you at Potions —”

“It’s got nothing to do with that!” said Hermione, her cheeks reddening. “I just think it’s very irresponsible to start performing spells when you don’t even know what they’re for, and stop talking about ‘the Prince’ as if it’s his title, I bet it’s just a stupid nickname, and it doesn’t seem as though he was a very nice person to me!”

“I don’t see where you get that from,” said Harry heatedly. “If he’d been a budding Death Eater he wouldn’t have been boasting about being ‘half-blood,’ would he?”

Even as he said it, Harry remembered that his father had been pure-blood, but he pushed the thought out of his mind; he would worry about that later. . . .

“The Death Eaters can’t all be pure-blood, there aren’t enough pure-blood wizards left,” said Hermione stubbornly. “I expect most of them are half-bloods pretending to be pure. It’s only Muggle-borns they hate, they’d be quite happy to let you and Ron join up.”

“There is no way they’d let me be a Death Eater!” said Ron indignantly, a bit of sausage flying off the fork he was now brandishing at Hermione and hitting Ernie Macmillan on the head. “My whole family are blood traitors! That’s as bad as Muggle-borns to Death Eaters!”

“And they’d love to have me,” said Harry sarcastically. “We’d be best pals if they didn’t keep trying to do me in.”

This made Ron laugh; even Hermione gave a grudging smile, and a distraction arrived in the shape of Ginny.

“Hey, Harry, I’m supposed to give you this.”

It was a scroll of parchment with Harry’s name written upon it in familiar thin, slanting writing.

“Thanks, Ginny . . . It’s Dumbledore’s next lesson!” Harry told Ron and Hermione, pulling open the parchment and quickly reading its contents. “Monday evening!” He felt suddenly light and happy. “Want to join us in Hogsmeade, Ginny?” he asked.

“I’m going with Dean — might see you there,” she replied, waving at them as she left.

Filch was standing at the oak front doors as usual, checking off the names of people who had permission to go into Hogsmeade. The process took even longer than normal as Filch was triple-checking everybody with his Secrecy Sensor.

“What does it matter if we’re smuggling Dark stuff OUT?” demanded Ron, eyeing the long thin Secrecy Sensor with apprehension. “Surely you ought to be checking what we bring back IN?”

His cheek earned him a few extra jabs with the Sensor, and he was still wincing as they stepped out into the wind and sleet.

The walk into Hogsmeade was not enjoyable. Harry wrapped his scarf over his lower face; the exposed part soon felt both raw and numb. The road to the village was full of students bent double against the bitter wind. More than once Harry wondered whether they might not have had a better time in the warm common room, and when they finally reached Hogsmeade and saw that Zonko’s Joke Shop had been

boarded up, Harry took it as confirmation that this trip was not destined to be fun. Ron pointed, with a thickly gloved hand, toward Honeydukes, which was mercifully open, and Harry and Hermione staggered in his wake into the crowded shop.

“Thank God,” shivered Ron as they were enveloped by warm, toffee-scented air. “Let’s stay here all afternoon.”

“Harry, m’boy!” said a booming voice from behind them.

“Oh no,” muttered Harry. The three of them turned to see Professor Slughorn, who was wearing an enormous furry hat and an overcoat with matching fur collar, clutching a large bag of crystalized pineapple, and occupying at least a quarter of the shop.

“Harry, that’s three of my little suppers you’ve missed now!” said Slughorn, poking him genially in the chest. “It won’t do, m’boy, I’m determined to have you! Miss Granger loves them, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Hermione helplessly, “they’re really —”

“So why don’t you come along, Harry?” demanded Slughorn.

“Well, I’ve had Quidditch practice, Professor,” said Harry, who had indeed been scheduling practices every time Slughorn had sent him a little, violet ribbon-adorned invitation. This strategy meant that Ron was not left out, and they usually had a laugh with Ginny, imagining Hermione shut up with McLaggen and Zabini.

“Well, I certainly expect you to win your first match after all this hard work!” said Slughorn. “But a little recreation never hurt anybody. Now, how about Monday night, you can’t possibly want to practice in this weather. . . .”

“I can’t, Professor, I’ve got — er — an appointment with Professor Dumbledore that evening.”

“Unlucky again!” cried Slughorn dramatically. “Ah, well . . . you can’t evade me forever, Harry!”

And with a regal wave, he waddled out of the shop, taking as little notice of Ron as though he had been a display of Cockroach Clusters.

“I can’t believe you’ve wriggled out of another one,” said Hermione, shaking her head. “They’re not *that* bad, you know. . . . They’re even quite fun sometimes. . . .” But then she caught sight of Ron’s expression. “Oh, look — they’ve got deluxe sugar quills — those would last hours!”

Glad that Hermione had changed the subject, Harry showed much more interest in the new extra-large sugar quills than he would normally have done, but Ron continued to look moody and merely shrugged when Hermione asked him where he wanted to go next.

“Let’s go to the Three Broomsticks,” said Harry. “It’ll be warm.”

They bundled their scarves back over their faces and left the sweetshop. The bitter wind was like knives on their faces after the sugary warmth of Honeydukes. The street was not very busy; nobody was lingering to chat, just hurrying toward their destinations. The exceptions were two men a little ahead of them, standing just outside the Three Broomsticks. One was very tall and thin; squinting through his rain-washed glasses Harry recognized the barman who worked in the other Hogsmeade pub, the Hog’s Head. As Harry, Ron, and Hermione drew closer, the barman drew his cloak more tightly around his neck and walked away, leaving the shorter man to fumble with something in his arms. They were barely feet from him when Harry realized who the man was.

“Mundungus!”

The squat, bandy-legged man with long, straggly, ginger hair jumped and dropped an ancient suitcase, which burst open, releasing what looked like the entire contents of a junk shop window.

“Oh, ’ello, ’Arry,” said Mundungus Fletcher, with a most unconvincing stab at airiness. “Well, don’t let me keep ya.”

And he began scrabbling on the ground to retrieve the contents of his suitcase with every appearance of a man eager to be gone.

“Are you selling this stuff?” asked Harry, watching Mundungus grab an assortment of grubby-looking objects from the ground.

“Oh, well, gotta scrape a living,” said Mundungus. “Gimme that!”

Ron had stooped down and picked up something silver.

“Hang on,” Ron said slowly. “This looks familiar —”

“Thank you!” said Mundungus, snatching the goblet out of Ron’s hand and stuffing it back into the case. “Well, I’ll see you all — OUCH!”

Harry had pinned Mundungus against the wall of the pub by the throat. Holding him fast with one hand, he pulled out his wand.

“Harry!” squealed Hermione.

“You took that from Sirius’s house,” said Harry, who was almost nose to nose with Mundungus and was breathing in an unpleasant smell of old tobacco and spirits. “That had the Black family crest on it.”

“I — no — what — ?” spluttered Mundungus, who was slowly turning purple.

“What did you do, go back the night he died and strip the place?” snarled Harry.

“I — no —”

“Give it to me!”

“Harry, you mustn’t!” shrieked Hermione, as Mundungus started to turn blue.

There was a bang, and Harry felt his hands fly off Mundungus’s throat. Gasping and spluttering, Mundungus seized his fallen case, then — *CRACK* — he Disapparated.

Harry swore at the top of his voice, spinning on the spot to see where Mundungus had gone.

“COME BACK, YOU THIEVING — !”

“There’s no point, Harry.”

Tonks had appeared out of nowhere, her mousy hair wet with sleet.

“Mundungus will probably be in London by now. There’s no point yelling.”

“He’s nicked Sirius’s stuff! Nicked it!”

“Yes, but still,” said Tonks, who seemed perfectly untroubled by this piece of information. “You should get out of the cold.”

She watched them go through the door of the Three Broomsticks.

The moment he was inside, Harry burst out, “*He was nicking Sirius’s stuff!*”

“I know, Harry, but please don’t shout, people are staring,” whispered Hermione. “Go and sit down, I’ll get you a drink.”

Harry was still fuming when Hermione returned to their table a few minutes later holding three bottles of butterbeer.

“Can’t the Order control Mundungus?” Harry demanded of the other two in a furious whisper. “Can’t they at least stop him stealing everything that’s not fixed down when he’s at headquarters?”

“Shh!” said Hermione desperately, looking around to make sure nobody was listening; there were a couple of warlocks sitting close by who were staring at Harry with great interest, and Zabini was lolling against a pillar not far away. “Harry, I’d be annoyed too, I know it’s your things he’s stealing —”

Harry gagged on his butterbeer; he had momentarily forgotten that he owned number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

“Yeah, it’s my stuff!” he said. “No wonder he wasn’t pleased to see me! Well, I’m going to tell Dumbledore what’s going on, he’s the only one who scares Mundungus.”

“Good idea,” whispered Hermione, clearly pleased that Harry was calming down. “Ron, what are you staring at?”

“Nothing,” said Ron, hastily looking away from the bar, but Harry knew he was trying to catch the eye of the curvy and attractive barmaid, Madam Rosmerta, for whom he had long nursed a soft spot.

“I expect ‘nothing’s’ in the back getting more firewhisky,” said Hermione waspishly.

Ron ignored this jibe, sipping his drink in what he evidently considered to be a dignified silence. Harry was thinking about Sirius, and how he had hated those silver goblets anyway. Hermione drummed her fingers on the table, her eyes flickering between Ron and the bar. The moment Harry drained the last drops in his bottle she said, “Shall we call it a day and go back to school, then?”

The other two nodded; it had not been a fun trip and the weather was getting worse the longer they stayed. Once again they drew their cloaks tightly around them, rearranged their scarves, pulled on their gloves, then followed Katie Bell and a friend out of the pub and back

up the High Street. Harry's thoughts strayed to Ginny as they trudged up the road to Hogwarts through the frozen slush. They had not met up with her, undoubtedly, thought Harry, because she and Dean were cozily closeted in Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop, that haunt of happy couples. Scowling, he bowed his head against the swirling sleet and trudged on.

It was a little while before Harry became aware that the voices of Katie Bell and her friend, which were being carried back to him on the wind, had become shriller and louder. Harry squinted at their indistinct figures. The two girls were having an argument about something Katie was holding in her hand. "It's nothing to do with you, Leanne!" Harry heard Katie say.

They rounded a corner in the lane, sleet coming thick and fast, blurring Harry's glasses. Just as he raised a gloved hand to wipe them, Leanne made to grab hold of the package Katie was holding; Katie tugged it back and the package fell to the ground.

At once, Katie rose into the air, not as Ron had done, suspended comically by the ankle, but gracefully, her arms outstretched, as though she was about to fly. Yet there was something wrong, something eerie. . . . Her hair was whipped around her by the fierce wind, but her eyes were closed and her face was quite empty of expression. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Leanne had all halted in their tracks, watching.

Then, six feet above the ground, Katie let out a terrible scream. Her eyes flew open but whatever she could see, or whatever she was feeling, was clearly causing her terrible anguish. She screamed and screamed; Leanne started to scream too and seized Katie's ankles,

trying to tug her back to the ground. Harry, Ron, and Hermione rushed forward to help, but even as they grabbed Katie's legs, she fell on top of them; Harry and Ron managed to catch her but she was writhing so much they could hardly hold her. Instead they lowered her to the ground where she thrashed and screamed, apparently unable to recognize any of them.

Harry looked around; the landscape seemed deserted.

"Stay there!" he shouted at the others over the howling wind. "I'm going for help!"

He began to sprint toward the school; he had never seen anyone behave as Katie had just behaved and could not think what had caused it; he hurtled around a bend in the lane and collided with what seemed to be an enormous bear on its hind legs.

"Hagrid!" he panted, disentangling himself from the hedgerow into which he had fallen.

"Harry!" said Hagrid, who had sleet trapped in his eyebrows and beard, and was wearing his great, shaggy beaverskin coat. "Jus' bin visitin' Grawp, he's comin' on so well yeh wouldn' —"

"Hagrid, someone's hurt back there, or cursed, or something —"

"Wha'?" said Hagrid, bending lower to hear what Harry was saying over the raging wind.

"Someone's been cursed!" bellowed Harry.

"Cursed? Who's bin cursed — not Ron? Hermione?"

"No, it's not them, it's Katie Bell — this way . . ."

Together they ran back along the lane. It took them no time to find the little group of people around Katie, who was still writhing and screaming on the ground; Ron, Hermione, and Leanne were all trying

to quiet her.

“Get back!” shouted Hagrid. “Lemme see her!”

“Something’s happened to her!” sobbed Leanne. “I don’t know what —”

Hagrid stared at Katie for a second, then without a word, bent down, scooped her into his arms, and ran off toward the castle with her. Within seconds, Katie’s piercing screams had died away and the only sound was the roar of the wind.

Hermione hurried over to Katie’s wailing friend and put an arm around her.

“It’s Leanne, isn’t it?”

The girl nodded.

“Did it just happen all of a sudden, or — ?”

“It was when that package tore,” sobbed Leanne, pointing at the now sodden brown-paper package on the ground, which had split open to reveal a greenish glitter. Ron bent down, his hand outstretched, but Harry seized his arm and pulled him back.

“Don’t touch it!”

He crouched down. An ornate opal necklace was visible, poking out of the paper.

“I’ve seen that before,” said Harry, staring at the thing. “It was on display in Borgin and Burkes ages ago. The label said it was cursed. Katie must have touched it.” He looked up at Leanne, who had started to shake uncontrollably. “How did Katie get hold of this?”

“Well, that’s why we were arguing. She came back from the bathroom in the Three Broomsticks holding it, said it was a surprise for somebody at Hogwarts and she had to deliver it. She looked all

funny when she said it. . . . Oh no, oh no, I bet she'd been Imperiused and I didn't realize!"

Leanne shook with renewed sobs. Hermione patted her shoulder gently.

"She didn't say who'd given it to her, Leanne?"

"No . . . she wouldn't tell me . . . and I said she was being stupid and not to take it up to school, but she just wouldn't listen and . . . and then I tried to grab it from her . . . and — and —"

Leanne let out a wail of despair.

"We'd better get up to school," said Hermione, her arm still around Leanne. "We'll be able to find out how she is. Come on. . . ."

Harry hesitated for a moment, then pulled his scarf from around his face and, ignoring Ron's gasp, carefully covered the necklace in it and picked it up.

"We'll need to show this to Madam Pomfrey," he said.

As they followed Hermione and Leanne up the road, Harry was thinking furiously. They had just entered the grounds when he spoke, unable to keep his thoughts to himself any longer.

"Malfoy knows about this necklace. It was in a case at Borgin and Burkes four years ago, I saw him having a good look at it while I was hiding from him and his dad. *This* is what he was buying that day when we followed him! He remembered it and he went back for it!"

"I — I dunno, Harry," said Ron hesitantly. "Loads of people go to Borgin and Burkes . . . and didn't that girl say Katie got it in the girls' bathroom?"

"She said she came back from the bathroom with it, she didn't necessarily get it in the bathroom itself —"

“McGonagall!” said Ron warningly.

Harry looked up. Sure enough, Professor McGonagall was hurrying down the stone steps through swirling sleet to meet them.

“Hagrid says you four saw what happened to Katie Bell — upstairs to my office at once, please! What’s that you’re holding, Potter?”

“It’s the thing she touched,” said Harry.

“Good lord,” said Professor McGonagall, looking alarmed as she took the necklace from Harry. “No, no, Filch, they’re with me!” she added hastily, as Filch came shuffling eagerly across the entrance hall holding his Secrecy Sensor aloft. “Take this necklace to Professor Snape at once, but be sure not to touch it, keep it wrapped in the scarf!”

Harry and the others followed Professor McGonagall upstairs and into her office. The sleet-spattered windows were rattling in their frames, and the room was chilly despite the fire crackling in the grate. Professor McGonagall closed the door and swept around her desk to face Harry, Ron, Hermione, and the still sobbing Leanne.

“Well?” she said sharply. “What happened?”

Haltingly, and with many pauses while she attempted to control her crying, Leanne told Professor McGonagall how Katie had gone to the bathroom in the Three Broomsticks and returned holding the unmarked package, how Katie had seemed a little odd, and how they had argued about the advisability of agreeing to deliver unknown objects, the argument culminating in the tussle over the parcel, which tore open. At this point, Leanne was so overcome, there was no getting another word out of her.

“All right,” said Professor McGonagall, not unkindly, “go up to the hospital wing, please, Leanne, and get Madam Pomfrey to give you something for shock.”

When she had left the room, Professor McGonagall turned back to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

“What happened when Katie touched the necklace?”

“She rose up in the air,” said Harry, before either Ron or Hermione could speak, “and then began to scream, and collapsed. Professor, can I see Professor Dumbledore, please?”

“The headmaster is away until Monday, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, looking surprised.

“Away?” Harry repeated angrily.

“Yes, Potter, away!” said Professor McGonagall tartly. “But anything you have to say about this horrible business can be said to me, I’m sure!”

For a split second, Harry hesitated. Professor McGonagall did not invite confidences; Dumbledore, though in many ways more intimidating, still seemed less likely to scorn a theory, however wild. This was a life-and-death matter, though, and no moment to worry about being laughed at.

“I think Draco Malfoy gave Katie that necklace, Professor.”

On one side of him, Ron rubbed his nose in apparent embarrassment; on the other, Hermione shuffled her feet as though quite keen to put a bit of distance between herself and Harry.

“That is a very serious accusation, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, after a shocked pause. “Do you have any proof?”

“No,” said Harry, “but . . .” and he told her about following

Malfoy to Borgin and Burkes and the conversation they had overheard between him and Mr. Borgin.

When he had finished speaking, Professor McGonagall looked slightly confused.

“Malfoy took something to Borgin and Burkes for repair?”

“No, Professor, he just wanted Borgin to tell him how to mend something, he didn’t have it with him. But that’s not the point, the thing is that he bought something at the same time, and I think it was that necklace —”

“You saw Malfoy leaving the shop with a similar package?”

“No, Professor, he told Borgin to keep it in the shop for him —”

“But Harry,” Hermione interrupted, “Borgin asked him if he wanted to take it with him, and Malfoy said no —”

“Because he didn’t want to touch it, obviously!” said Harry angrily.

“What he actually said was, ‘How would I look carrying that down the street?’” said Hermione.

“Well, he would look a bit of a prat carrying a necklace,” interjected Ron.

“Oh, Ron,” said Hermione despairingly, “it would be all wrapped up, so he wouldn’t have to touch it, and quite easy to hide inside a cloak, so nobody would see it! I think whatever he reserved at Borgin and Burkes was noisy or bulky, something he knew would draw attention to him if he carried it down the street — and in any case,” she pressed on loudly, before Harry could interrupt, “I asked Borgin about the necklace, don’t you remember? When I went in to try and find out what Malfoy had asked him to keep, I saw it there.

And Borgin just told me the price, he didn't say it was already sold or anything —”

“Well, you were being really obvious, he realized what you were up to within about five seconds, of course he wasn't going to tell you — anyway, Malfoy could've sent off for it since —”

“That's enough!” said Professor McGonagall, as Hermione opened her mouth to retort, looking furious. “Potter, I appreciate you telling me this, but we cannot point the finger of blame at Mr. Malfoy purely because he visited the shop where this necklace might have been purchased. The same is probably true of hundreds of people —”

“— that's what I said —” muttered Ron.

“— and in any case, we have put stringent security measures in place this year. I do not believe that necklace can possibly have entered this school without our knowledge —”

“But —”

“— and what is more,” said Professor McGonagall, with an air of awful finality, “Mr. Malfoy was not in Hogsmeade today.”

Harry gaped at her, deflating.

“How do you know, Professor?”

“Because he was doing detention with me. He has now failed to complete his Transfiguration homework twice in a row. So, thank you for telling me your suspicions, Potter,” she said as she marched past them, “but I need to go up to the hospital wing now to check on Katie Bell. Good day to you all.”

She held open her office door. They had no choice but to file past her without another word.

Harry was angry with the other two for siding with McGonagall;

nevertheless, he felt compelled to join in once they started discussing what had happened.

“So who do you reckon Katie was supposed to give the necklace to?” asked Ron, as they climbed the stairs to the common room.

“Goodness only knows,” said Hermione. “But whoever it was has had a narrow escape. No one could have opened that package without touching the necklace.”

“It could’ve been meant for loads of people,” said Harry. “Dumbledore — the Death Eaters would love to get rid of him, he must be one of their top targets. Or Slughorn — Dumbledore reckons Voldemort really wanted him and they can’t be pleased that he’s sided with Dumbledore. Or —”

“Or you,” said Hermione, looking troubled.

“Couldn’t have been,” said Harry, “or Katie would’ve just turned around in the lane and given it to me, wouldn’t she? I was behind her all the way out of the Three Broomsticks. It would have made much more sense to deliver the parcel outside Hogwarts, what with Filch searching everyone who goes in and out. I wonder why Malfoy told her to take it into the castle?”

“Harry, Malfoy wasn’t in Hogsmeade!” said Hermione, actually stamping her foot in frustration.

“He must have used an accomplice, then,” said Harry. “Crabbe or Goyle — or, come to think of it, another Death Eater, he’ll have loads better cronies than Crabbe and Goyle now he’s joined up —”

Ron and Hermione exchanged looks that plainly said *There’s no point arguing with him.*

“Dilligrout,” said Hermione firmly as they reached the Fat Lady.

The portrait swung open to admit them to the common room. It was quite full and smelled of damp clothing; many people seemed to have returned from Hogsmeade early because of the bad weather. There was no buzz of fear or speculation, however: Clearly, the news of Katie's fate had not yet spread.

"It wasn't a very slick attack, really, when you stop and think about it," said Ron, casually turfing a first year out of one of the good armchairs by the fire so that he could sit down. "The curse didn't even make it into the castle. Not what you'd call foolproof."

"You're right," said Hermione, prodding Ron out of the chair with her foot and offering it to the first year again. "It wasn't very well thought-out at all."

"But since when has Malfoy been one of the world's great thinkers?" asked Harry.

Neither Ron nor Hermione answered him.

Silwer en Opale

Waar is Dumbledore en wat doen hy? Harry sien die Skoolhoof die volgende paar weke net twee keer skrams. Hy daag selde meer vir ete op en Harry is seker Hermione is reg om te dink hy verlaat die skool vir dae aaneen. Het Dumbledore vergeet van die lesse wat hy veronderstel is om vir Harry te gee? Dumbledore het gesê die lesse gaan lei tot iets wat met die profesie te doen het; dit het Harry moed gegee, 'n gekoesterde gevoel, maar nou voel hy asof hy net aan sy eie lot oorgelaat is.

Halfpad deur Oktober mag hulle die eerste keer Hogsmeade toe gaan. Harry het gewonder of hierdie uitstappies nog toegelaat sal word noudat die skool se sekuriteitsmaatreëls so verskerp is en hy is baie bly dat hulle wel mag gaan; dit is altyd lekker om vir 'n paar uur by die kasteel se terrein te kan uitkom.

Harry word die oggend van die uitstappie vroeg wakker. Dit is stormagtig buite en hy verwyl die tyd tot ontbyt deur sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* te lees. Hy lê nie gewoonlik in die bed en teksboeke lees nie; daardie soort gedrag is, soos Ron tereg sê, onbetaamlik vir enigiemand behalwe Hermione, wat in daardie opsig eenvoudig vreemd is. Harry voel egter die Halfbloed Prins se eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* kwalifiseer beswaarlik as 'n teksboek. Hoe meer hy hom in die boek verdiep, hoe meer besef Harry hoeveel daarin vervat is; nie net die handige wenke en kortpaaie vir towerdrankies wat hom so 'n gloeiende reputasie by Slughorn besorg het nie, maar ook die verbeeldingryke klein towerspreuke in die kantlyne. Te oordeel na die doodgekrapte en hersiene dele, laat Harry dink die Prins het dit alles self uitgedink.

Harry het alreeds 'n paar van die Prins se selfuitgedinkte towerspreuke op die proef gestel. Daar is 'n spreuk wat toonnaels ontstellend vinnig laat groei (hy het dit met baie vermaaklike resultate in die gang op Crabbe probeer); daar is een wat jou tong aan jou verhemelte laat vassit (hy het dit twee keer onder algemene applous op 'n niksvermoedende Argus Filch gebruik); en dan is daar, miskien die

nuttigste van almal, *Muffliato*, 'n towerspreuk wat enigiemand naby jou se ore met 'n onidentifiseerbare gegons vul sodat jy lang gesprekke in die klas kan voer sonder dat enigiemand kan afluister. Die enigste persoon wat nie dink hierdie towerspreuke is snaaks nie, is Hermione, wat 'n streng afkeurende uitdrukking kry en weier om enigiets te sê as Harry die *Muffliato*-spreuk op enigiemand in die omtrek gebruik het.

Harry sit regop in die bed en draai die boek skuins om die gekrabbelde instruksies vir 'n towerspreuk waarmee die Prins blykbaar gesukkel het, uit te maak. Daar is baie goed doodgetrek en verander, maar uiteindelik staan daar in een hoek van die bladsy:

Levicorpus (n-vbl)

Terwyl die wind en ysreën genadeloos teen die vensters hamer en Neville hard snork, staar Harry na die letters tussen hakies. *N-vbl* ... dit moet nieverbaal beteken. Harry twyfel sterk of hy hierdie spesifieke towerspreuk sal kan bemeester; hy sukkel nog steeds met nieverbale spreuke, iets waarop Snape in elke VDK-klas kommentaar lewer. Aan die ander kant was die Prins tot dusver 'n baie beter onderwyser as Snape.

Harry wys met sy towerstaf na niks spesifieks nie, swiep dit opwaarts en sê in sy kop *Levicorpus!*

“Aaaaaargh!”

Daar flits 'n ligstraal en die kamer is vol stemme: Almal het wakker geword van Ron se gil. Harry gooi sy *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* paniekerig eenkant; Ron swaai onderstebo tussen hemel en aarde rond asof 'n onsigbare haak hom aan die enkel opgehys het.

“'Skuus!” gil Harry terwyl Dean en Seamus brul van die lag en Neville, wat uit die bed geval het, van die vloer af opstaan. “Wag – ek laat jou afkom –”

Hy gryp die towerdrankieboek en blaai vervaard daardeur op soek na die regte bladsy; uiteindelik kry hy dit en ontsyfer een woord wat onder die towerspreuk ingedruk is; Harry hoop en bid dit is 'n teenspreuk en dink met al sy mag *Liberacorpus!*

Daar flits weer 'n ligstraal en Ron val in 'n hoop op sy matras.

“'Skuus,” herhaal Harry flou terwyl Dean en Seamus nog steeds brul van die lag.

“Môre,” sê Ron gedemp, “moet jy liever jou wekker stel.”

Teen die tyd dat hulle aangetrek is, warm toegewikkel in 'n paar van mevrou Weasley se handgebreide truie en met mantels, serpe en handskoene aan, is Ron oor die skok en besluit hy Harry se nuwe towerspreuk is groot pret; soveel pret dat hy Hermione dadelik oor ontbyt op die storie trakteer.

“... en toe flits daar weer ’n ligstraal en ek beland terug op die bed!” grinnik Ron terwyl hy vir hom nog worsies kry.

Hermione glimlag nie een keer terwyl hy die storie vertel nie en draai nou met ’n uitdrukking van ysige afkeer na Harry.

“Kom hierdie towerspreuk dalk weer uit daai towerdrankieboek van jou?” vra sy.

Harry frons vir haar.

“Jy maak ook altyd die heel ergste afleidings.”

“Kom dit daaruit?”

“Wel ... ja, dit kom daaruit, maar wat daarvan?”

“So jy’t net besluit om ’n onbekende, handgeskrewe inkantasie te probeer en te kyk wat gebeur?”

“Wat maak dit saak dat dit handgeskrewe is?” vra Harry, wat verkies om nie die res van die vraag te antwoord nie.

“Omdat dit heel moontlik nie deur die Ministerie van Towerkuns goedgekeur is nie,” sê Hermione. “En ook,” voeg sy by terwyl Harry en Ron hul oë rol, “omdat ek begin dink hierdie Prins-ou was ’n bietjie geslepe.”

Harry en Ron lag haar dadelik dood.

“Dit was ’n grap!” sê Ron en keer ’n bottel tamatiesous oor sy wors om. “Net ’n grap, Hermione, dis al!”

“Om iemand onderstebo aan sy enkel te laat hang?” sê Hermione. “Wie bestee nou tyd en energie daaraan om sulke towerspreuke uit te dink?”

“Fred en George,” sê Ron en haal sy skouers op. “Dis *sports* vir ouens soos hulle en e –”

“My pa,” sê Harry. Hy het dit nou net onthou.

“Wat?” vra Ron en Hermione saam.

“My pa het hierdie towerspreuk gebruik,” sê Harry. “Ek – Lupin het my vertel.”

Die laaste gedeelte is nie waar nie; Harry het in werklikheid gesien hoe sy pa hierdie spreuk op Snape gebruik, maar hy het Ron en Hermione nooit van daardie spesifieke uitstappie in die Peinssif vertel nie. Hy dink skielik aan ’n wonderlike moontlikheid. Was die Halfbloed Prins dalk – ?

“Miskien hét jou pa dit gebruik, Harry,” sê Hermione, “maar hy is nie die enigste een nie. Moenie vergeet nie: Ons het al ’n hele klomp mense dit sien gebruik. Hulle laat mense onderstebo in die lug hang. Hulle laat hulle al verder wegsweef, aan die slaap en hulpeloos.”

Harry staar na haar. Met ’n mislike gevoel onthou hy nou ook wat die Doodseters by die Kwiddiek-wêreldbeker gedoen het. Ron snel hom te hulp.

“Dit was anders,” sê hy met oortuiging. “Hulle het dit misbruik. Harry en sy pa het dit net vir die grap gedoen. Jy hou nie van die Prins nie, Hermione,” voeg hy by en beduie streng met ’n worsie na haar, “omdat hy beter as jy is met Towerdrankies – ”

“Dit het niks daarmee uit te waai nie!” sê Hermione en haar wange word rooi. “Ek dink net dis onverantwoordelik om tower-spreuke te gebruik as jy nie eens weet waarvoor hulle is nie, en hou op om van “die Prins” te praat asof dit sy titel is. Ek wed jou dit was net ’n simpel bynaam en hy was glad nie so ’n wonderlike mens nie!”

“Ek weet nie wat jou só laat dink nie,” sê Harry driftig. “As hy ’n Doodseter in wording was, sou hy mos nie daarmee gespog het dat hy ‘Halfbloed’ was nie, sou hy?”

Terwyl hy dit sê, onthou Harry sy pa was ’n suiwerbloeder, maar hy wil nie nou daaraan dink nie; hy sal hom later daaroor bekommer ...

“Die Doodseters kan nie almal suiwerbloeders wees nie; daar is nie genoeg suiwerbloed towenaars oor nie,” sê Hermione hardkop-pig. “Ek dink die meeste van hulle is halfbloeders wat voorgee hulle is suiwer. Hulle haat net Moggel-geborenes; hulle sal jou en Ron met graagte by hulle wil laat aansluit.”

“Hulle sal my nooit toelaat om ’n Doodseter te word nie!” sê Ron verontwaardig. Hy beduie só heftig na Hermione dat ’n halfgeëte worsie van sy vurk af vlieg en Ernie Macmillan teen die kop tref. “My hele familie is bloedverraaiers! Vir die Doodseters is dit so erg soos Moggel-geborenes.”

“En hulle sal my bitter graag wil hê,” sê Harry sarkasties. “Ons sou beste maatjies gewees het as hulle my nie heelyd van die gras af probeer maak het nie.”

Dit laat Ron lag; selfs Hermione grinnik effens en dan daag Ginny op om hul aandag af te lei.

“Hei, Harry, ek moet dit glo vir jou gee.”

Dit is ’n perkamentrol waarop Harry se naam in ’n bekende dun, skuins handskrif geskryf is.

“Dankie, Ginny ... Dis Dumbledore se volgende les!” sê Harry vir Ron en Hermione terwyl hy die perkament ooprol en die inhoud vinnig lees. “Maandagaand!” Hy voel skielik lig en gelukkig. “Wil jy saam met ons Hogsmeade toe kom, Ginny?” vra hy.

“Ek gaan saam met Dean – maar ek sien julle dalk daar,” antwoord sy en waai toe sy wegloop.

Filch staan soos gewoonlik by die eikehoutvoordeure en merk die name af van mense wat toestemming het om Hogsmeade toe te

gaan. Die proses neem selfs nog langer as gewoonlik, want Filch deursoek almal drie keer met sy Soeksensor.

“Wat maak dit saak as ons Donker goed UITsmokkel?” wil Ron weet terwyl hy wantrouig na die lang, dun Soeksensor kyk. “Jy moet eerder kyk wat ons ná die tyd hier probeer INsmokkel.”

Danksy sy vermetelheid kry hy ’n ekstra paar harde steke in die sy met die Soeksensor; dit is nog steeds seer toe hulle in die wind en ysreën uitstap.

Hulle geniet nie die wandeling Hogsmead toe nie. Harry draai sy serp om die onderkant van sy gesig; dis nie lank nie of die deel wat uitsteek, voel rou en verkleum. Die pad na die dorp is vol studente wat vooroor gebuk teen die yswind stap. Harry wonder meer as een keer of dit nie baie lekkerder sou gewees het om in die warm geselskamer te bly nie; toe hulle uiteindelik in Hogsmeade aankom en sien Zonko se Grapwinkel is toegespyker, beskou hy dit as bevestiging dat hierdie uitstappie nie bestem is om pret te wees nie. Ron beduie met ’n dik handskoenhand na Honeydukes wat genadiglik oop is, en Harry en Hermione strompel agter hom by die oorvol winkel in.

“Dankie tog,” bibber Ron toe die warm lug wat na toffie ruik hulle omvou. “Ons kan heelmiddag hier bly.”

“Harry, ou seun!” basuin ’n stem agter hulle.

“Agge nee,” brom Harry. Die drie van hulle draai om en daar staan professor Slughorn. Hy dra ’n enorme pelshoed en jas met ’n bypassende pelskraag; daar is ’n groot sak versuikerde pynappelringe in sy hand en hy beset omtrent ’n kwart van die winkel.

“Harry, jy’t nou al drie van my aandetetjies gemis!” sê Slughorn en pomp hom gemoedelik in die ribbes. “Dit sal nie deug nie, ou seun; ek is vasberade om jou daar te hê! Juffrou Granger is dol op my geselligheidjies, nie waar nie?”

“Ja,” sê Hermione hulpeloos, “dis regtig –”

“Hoekom kom jy nie ’n slag saam nie, Harry?” dring Slughorn aan.

“Wel, ek moes Kwiddiek oefen, professor,” sê Harry, wat inderdaad elke keer dat Slughorn vir hom ’n uitnodiging versier met ’n perskleurige lint gestuur het, ’n oefensessie gereël het. Hierdie strategie het beteken Ron voel nie uitgesluit nie en hulle het lekker saam met Ginny gelag as hulle hul indink hoe Hermione tussen McLaggen en Zabini vasgekeer sit.

“Wel, ná soveel harde werk verwag ek beslis van julle om die eerste wedstryd te wen!” sê Slughorn. “Maar ’n bietjie ontspanning het niemand nog seergemaak nie. Nou ja, hoe klink Maandagaand? Julle kan onmoontlik nie in hierdie weer oefen nie ...”

“Ek kan nie, professor. Ek het – e – daardie aand ’n afspraak met professor Dumbledore.”

“Al weer ongelukkig!” roep Slughorn dramaties uit. “Ag wel ... jy kan my nie vir ewig ontwyk nie, Harry!”

En met ’n koninklike wuif waggel hy by die winkel uit terwyl hy so min notisie van Ron neem asof hy ’n Kakkerlakkklontjie is.

“Ek kan nie glo jy’t jou uit nóg een gewikkel nie,” sê Hermione en skud haar kop. “Dis darem nie só sleg nie, weet jy ... dis partykeer nogal lekker ...” Maar dan sien sy Ron se uitdrukking. “O, kyk – Hulle het Biele Suikerveerpenne – dit sal ure hou!”

Harry is bly Hermione het die onderwerp verander en toon baie meer belangstelling in die nuwe ekstragroot Suikerveerpenne as wat hy normaalweg sou, maar Ron lyk nog steeds knorrig en haal net sy skouers op toe Hermione vra waarheen hy volgende wil gaan.

“Kom ons gaan na die Drie Besemstokke toe!” stel Harry voor. “Dit sal warm wees daar.”

Hulle bind hul serpe weer om hul koppe en gaan by die lekker-goedwinkel uit. Die yswind voel soos messe op hul gesigte ná Honeydukes se suikerige warmte. Die straat is nie baie besig nie; niemand vertoef om te gesels nie; almal is haastig om by hul bestemming te kom. Die uitsondering is twee mans wat ’n entjie voor hulle net buitekant die Drie Besemstokke staan. Een is baie lank en maer; Harry knip sy oë agter sy natgereënde bril en herken die kroegman wat in Hogsmeade se ander kroeg, die Swynenes, werk. Toe Harry, Ron en Hermione nader kom, trek die kroegman sy kraag stywer om sy nek vas en loop weg terwyl die korter man ongemaklik met iets in sy arms vroetel. Hulle is amper by hom wanneer Harry die man herken.

“Mundungus!”

Die plomp hoepelbeenman met die lang, deurmekaar gemmerhare wip van die skrik en laat val ’n outydse koffer. Dit bars oop en goed wat soos die hele inhoud van ’n rommelwinkel se vertoonvenster lyk, peul uit. “O hallo, Harry,” sê Mundungus Fletcher gemaak lughartig. “Wel, moenie dat ek jou ophou nie.”

En hy begin op die grond rondskarrel om alles wat uit die koffer geval het weer daarin te stop terwyl hy lyk soos iemand wat gretig is om weg te kom.

“Verkoop jy daardie goed?” vra Harry, wat kyk hoe Mundungus ’n verskeidenheid vuilerige voorwerpe van die grond af optel.

“Og, mens moet aan die lewe bly,” sê Mundungus. “Gee dit hier!” Ron het gebuk en iets silwers opgetel.

“Wag ’n bietjie,” sê Ron stadig. “Dit lyk bekend –”

“Dankie!” sê Mundungus en gryp die beker uit Ron se hand en stop dit terug in die koffer. “Wel, sien julle – EINA!”

Harry druk Mundungus aan sy keel teen die kroeg se muur vas. Hy hou hom met een hand vas en pluk sy towerstaf uit.

“Harry!” keer Hermione.

“Jy’t dit uit Sirius se huis gevat!” sê Harry wat nou amper neus-aan-neus met Mundungus staan en ’n onaangename reuk van ou tabak en drank kry. “Dit het die Black-familie se wapen op.”

“Ek – nee – wat – ?” stotter Mundungus wat stadigaan pers word.

“Wat het jy gedoen? Is jy die nag wat hy dood is terug na sy huis om die plek te stroop?” grom Harry.

“Ek – nee –”

“Gee dit hier!”

“Harry, moenie!” skree Hermione, want Mundungus begin al blou word.

Daar is ’n knal en Harry voel hoe sy hande van Mundungus se keel af vlieg. Hortend en stotterend raap Mundungus sy koffer van die grond af op en – KRAAK – disappareer hy.

Harry vloek kliphard en swaai om om te sien waarheen Mundungus is.

“KOM TERUG, JOU DIEF!”

“Dit help nie, Harry.”

Tonks verskyn uit die niet, haar muishare nat van die ysreën.

“Mundungus is seker nou al in Londen. Jy skree verniet.”

“Hy’t Sirius se goed gesteel! Gesteel!”

“Ja, maar nogtans,” sê Tonks skynbaar min gepla oor hierdie stukkie inligting, “julle moet uit die koue kom.”

Sy maak seker hulle gaan by die Drie Besemstokke in. Die oomblik dat hy binnekant is, bars Harry uit: “Hy het Sirius se goed gesteel!”

“Ek weet, Harry, maar hou asseblief op skree; die mense kyk vir ons,” fluister Hermione. “Gaan sit. Ek kry vir jou iets om te drink.”

Harry is nog steeds smoorkwaad toe Hermione ’n paar minute later met drie bottels Botterbier opdaag.

“Kan die Orde Mundungus nie in toom hou nie?” fluister Harry woedend vir die ander twee. “Hulle kan ten minste keer dat hy alles wat nie vasgeskroef is nie, steel wanneer hy by hul Hoofkwartier kom!”

“Sjuut!” sê Hermione desperaat en kyk rond om seker te maak niemand luister nie. Daar sit ’n paar towenaars naby hulle wat Harry met groot belangstelling dophou, en Zabini leun teen ’n pilaar nie ver van hulle af nie. “Harry, ek sou ook ontsteld gewees het; ek weet dis jou goed wat hy steel –”

Harry stik in sy Botterbier; hy het vir 'n oomblik vergeet Grimmauldplein twaalf behoort aan hom.

“Ja, dis my goed!” sê hy. “G’n wonder hy was nie bly om my te sien nie! Wel, ek gaan vir Dumbledore sê wat aangaan; hy’s al een vir wie Mundungus skrik.”

“Goeie idee,” fluister Hermione, duidelik bly dat Harry besig is om te bedaar. “Ron, waarna staar jy so?”

“Niks,” sê Ron en kyk haastig weg van die kroegtoonbank, maar Harry weet hy probeer Madame Rosmerta, die geronde en aantreklike kroegmeisie vir wie hy lankal 'n sagte plekkie het, se oog vang.

“Ek veronderstel ‘niks’ is agtertoe om nog Vuurwhisky te kry,” sê Hermione bitsig.

Ron ignoreer hierdie stekie en teug in wat hy as 'n waardige stilte beskou aan sy drankie. Harry dink aan Sirius en aan hoe hy daardie silwer bekere in elk geval gehaat het. Hermione trommel met haar vingers op die tafel terwyl haar oë tussen Ron en die kroegtoonbank flikker.

Die oomblik dat Harry die laaste druppels in sy bottel gedrink het, sê sy: “Sal ons waai en teruggaan skool toe?”

Die ander twee knik; die uitstappie het nie lekker uitgedraai nie en hoe later dit word, hoe slegter raak die weer. Hulle knoop hul jasse weer toe, draai hul serpe om hul koppe, trek hul handskoene aan en volg Katie Bell en 'n vriendin by die kroeg uit en terug met die hoofstraat op. Harry dink aanhoudend aan Ginny terwyl hulle deur die gevriesde sneumodder straatop aansukkel. Hulle het haar natuurlik nie raakgeloop nie, dink Harry, omdat sy en Dean ongetwyfeld saam met al die ander verliefde paartjies in Madame Puddifoot se teekamer sit en kuier en koer. Hy frons, laat sak sy kop teen die ysreën en strompel voort.

Dit neem 'n rukkie voor Harry besef Katie Bell en haar vriendin se stemme, wat die wind na hom toe aanwaai, klink skrylender en harder as voorheen. Harry skreef sy oë om hulle duideliker te kan sien. Die twee meisies stry oor iets wat Katie in haar hand vashou.

“Dit het niks met jou uit te waai nie, Leanne!” hoor Harry Katie sê.

Hulle kom om 'n draai in die pad en die ysreën val nou so hard en vinnig dat Harry se brilglase toewasem. Net toe hy 'n handskoen-hand ophig om dit skoon te vee, gryp Leanne na die pakkie wat Katie vashou; Katie pluk terug en die pakkie val op die grond.

Katie styg meteens in die lug op, nie soos Ron wat komieklik aan sy enkel gehang het nie, maar grasieus, met haar arms uitgestrek asof sy gaan begin vlieg. Maar daar is nogtans iets verkeerd, iets onheilspellends ... die kwaai wind slaan haar gesig met haar hare,

maar haar oë is toe en daar is amper geen uitdrukking op haar gesig nie. Harry, Ron, Hermione en Leanne steek in hul spore vas en hou haar dop.

Ses voet bokant die grond gee Katie skielik 'n bloedstollende gil. Haar oë vlieg oop; wat sy ook al sien of wat sy ook al voel, maak haar duidelik doodsbenoud. Sy gil en gil; Leanne begin ook gil en gryp Katie se enkels en probeer haar terug grond toe trek. Harry, Ron en Hermione kom haastig help. Die oomblik dat hulle Katie se bene gryp, val sy bo-op hulle; Harry en Ron kry dit reg om haar te vang, maar sy wriemel so erg dat hulle haar skaars kan vashou. Hulle laat sak haar tot op die grond waar sy gillend met haar arms lê en slaan, skynbaar nie in staat om een van hulle te herken nie.

Harry kyk om; die landskap lyk verlate.

“Bly hier!” roep hy vir die ander bo-oor die huilende wind. “Ek gaan kry gou hulp!”

Harry begin skool toe hardloop. Hy het nog nooit iemand sien optree soos wat Katie nou net gedoen het nie en kan nie dink wat dit veroorsaak het nie; hy nael om 'n draai in die pad en bots teen iets wat soos 'n enorme beer op sy agterpote lyk.

“Hagrid!” hyg hy terwyl hy opkom uit die heining waarin hy geval het.

“Harry!” sê Hagrid. Daar sit stukkies ys in sy ooghare en baard vas en hy dra sy yslike, wollerige bewerveljas. “Ek't bietjie by Ghrop gaan kuier en hy kom so mooi reg dat jy nie —”

“Hagrid, iemand hier agter het seergekry, of sy is vervloek of iets —”

“Wat?” sê Hagrid en buk laag af om Harry in die stormwind te kan hoor.

“Iemand is vervloek!” bulder Harry.

“Vervloek? Wie's vervloek – Ron? Hermione?”

“Nie, nie hulle nie, Katie Bell – hierlangs ...”

Hulle hardloop saam met die pad af. Nie lank nie en hulle is by die klein groepie wat saamdrom om Katie, wat nog steeds op die grond lê en skreeuend met haar arms rondslaan. Ron, Hermione en Leanne probeer haar kalmeeer.

“Staan terug!” roep Hagrid, “dat ek haar kan sien!”

“Daar't iets met haar gebeur!” snik Leanne. “Ek weet nie wat nie!”

Hagrid kyk vir 'n oomblik na Katie, dan buk hy sonder 'n woord af, tel haar in sy arms op en hardloop met haar kasteel toe. Binne sekondes doof Katie se skril gille weg en die enigste klank wat oorbly, is die wind se geloei.

Hermione sit haar arm om Katie se huilende vriendin.

“Jy is mos Leanne, nè?”

Die meisie knik.

“Het dit net ewe skielik gebeur of – ?”

“Dit was toe daai pakkie skeur,” sê Leanne snikkend en wys na die bruinpapierpakkie wat nou deurweek op die grond lê en oopgebars het sodat ’n mens ’n groenerige glinstering daarin kan sien. Ron buk af om daaraan te vat, maar Harry kry sy arms beet en trek hom weg.

“Moenie daaraan vat nie!”

Hy gaan sit op sy hurke om te sien wat by die papier uitsteek. Dit lyk soos ’n weelderige opaalhalssnoer.

“Ek het dit al iewers gesien,” sê Harry terwyl hy daarna staar. “Dit was lank gelede op uitstalling in Borgin en Burkes. Die etiket het gesê dis vervloek. Katie moet daaraan geraak het.” Hy kyk op na Leanne, wat onbeheerbaar begin ruk het. “Hoe het Katie dit in die hande gekry?”

“Wel, dis hoekom ons gestry het. Sy’t met die pakkie by die Drie Besemstokke se kleedkamer uitgekom en gesê dis ’n verrassing vir iemand in Hogwarts en sy moet dit aflewer. Sy’t baie snaaks gelyk toe sy dit sê ... O nee, o nee, ek dink sy’s deur die Imperiusvloek getref en ek het dit nie besef nie!”

Leanne ruk van hernude snikke. Hermione vryf sag oor haar skouers.

“Het sy nie gesê wie dit vir haar gegee het nie, Leanne?”

“Nee ... Sy wou my nie sê nie ... en ek het gesê sy’s simpel en sy moet dit nie op skool toe vat nie, maar sy wou nie luister nie en ... en toe het ek dit by haar probeer afvat ... en – en –” Leanne begin weer wanhopig huil.

“Ons beter bo by die skool kom,” sê Hermione met haar arm nog steeds om Leanne. “Ons moet uitvind hoe dit met haar gaan. Kom – aan ...”

Harry huiwer vir ’n oomblik, haal dan sy serp om sy gesig af, ignoreer Ron se gehyg, gooi sy serp oor die halssnoer en tel dit versigtig op.

“Ons sal dit vir Madame Pomfrey moet gaan wys,” sê hy.

Terwyl hulle Hermione en Leanne met die pad langs boontoe volg, werk Harry se brein in hoogste rat. Net toe hulle die skoolgrond binnegaan, begin hy praat, want hy kan sy gedagtes nie langer vir homself hou nie.

“Malfoy weet van die halssnoer. Dit was vier jaar gelede in ’n vertoonkas by Borgin en Burkes. Ek het gesien hoe hy en sy pa daarna staan en kyk. Dis wat hy gekoop het die dag toe ons hom agtervolg het! Hy’t dit onthou en hy’s terug soontoe om dit te kry!”

“Ek – ek weet nie, Harry,” sê Ron huiwerig. “Baie mense gaan na Borgin en Burkes toe ... en het Leanne nie gesê Katie het dit in die meisies se kleedkamer gekry nie?”

“Sy’t gesê sy’t by die kleedkamer daarmee uitgekom, wat nie noodwendig beteken sy’t dit in die kleedkamer self gekry nie –”

“McGonagall!” waarsku Ron.

Harry kyk op en sowaar, professor McGonagall kom in die snerpemde ysreën by die kliptrap af en loop hulle tegemoet.

“Hagrid sê julle vier het gesien wat met Katie Bell gebeur het – bo na my kantoor toe, op die daad! Wat het jy daar, Potter?”

“Dis die ding waaraan sy geraak het,” sê Harry.

“Goeie hemel,” sê professor McGonagall en lyk onthuts toe sy die halssnoer by Harry neem, “Nee, nee, Filch; hulle is saam met my!” voeg sy haastig by toe Filch gretig met sy Soeksensor omhoog in die Ingangsportaal nader skuifel. “Neem hierdie halssnoer dadelik na professor Snape, maar maak seker jy raak nie daaraan nie en hou dit in die serp toegedraai!”

Harry en die ander volg professor McGonagall met die trap op na haar kantoor. Die vensters is bespat van die ysreën en ratel in hul rame, en die vertrek is koud ten spyte van die vuur wat in die kaggel knetter. Professor McGonagall maak die deur toe en swiep om haar lessenaar sodat sy Harry, Ron, Hermione en Leanne, wat nog steeds snik, in die oë kan kyk.

“Wel?” vra sy skerp. “Wat het gebeur?”

Hortend, en met baie pouses waarin sy haar gehuil onder beheer probeer kry, vertel Leanne vir professor McGonagall hoe Katie in die Drie Besemstokke kleedkamer toe is en met die pakkie sonder naam teruggekom het, hoe Katie ’n bietjie snaaks gelyk het en hoe hulle gestry het of dit raadsaam is om in te stem om onbekende voorwerpe af te lewer en die argument uiteindelik uitgeloop het op ’n gestoei oor die pakkie, wat toe oopgeskeur het. Hier raak Leanne weer so aangedaan dat hulle nie ’n enkele woord verder uit haar kan kry nie.

“Nou goed,” sê professor McGonagall nogal heel vriendelik, “gaan asseblief na die siekeboeg toe, Leanne, en laat Madame Pomfrey vir jou iets vir die skok gee.”

Toe sy by die vertrek uit is, draai professor McGonagall terug na Harry, Ron en Hermione.

“Wat het gebeur toe Katie aan die halssnoer raak?”

“Sy’t in die lug opgestyg,” sê Harry voor Ron of Hermione nog hul monde kan oopmaak. “En toe’t sy begin gil en neergestort. Professor, kan ek asseblief met professor Dumbledore praat?”

“Die Skoolhoof is weg tot Maandag, Potter,” sê professor McGonagall en lyk verbaas.

“Weg?” herhaal Harry kwaad.

“Ja, Potter, weg!” sê professor McGonagall kortaf. “Maar as jy enigiets oor hierdie vreeslike voorval wil sê, kan jy dit gerus met my bespreek.”

Harry huiwer vir ’n breukdeel van ’n sekonde. Professor McGonagall is nie juis die soort mens vir wie jy geheime vertel nie; Dumbledore aan die ander kant is in baie opsigte meer intimiderend, maar dalk minder geneig om ’n teorie, al is dit ook hoe vergesog, as niks af te maak. Hierdie is egter ’n kwessie van lewe en dood en dit is nie nou die tyd om bekommerd te wees oor of jy uitgelag gaan word nie.

“Ek dink Draco Malfoy het daardie halssnoer vir Katie gegee, professor.”

Aan Harry se een kant vryf Ron sy neus klaarblyklik uit verleentheid en aan sy ander kant skuifel Hermione haar voete asof sy taamlik gretig is om ’n bietjie afstand tussen haar en hom te skep.

“Dit is ’n baie ernstige aantyging, Potter,” sê professor McGonagall ná ’n geskokte stilte. “Het jy enige bewyse?”

“Nee,” sê Harry, “maar ...” en hy vertel haar hoe hulle Malfoy na Borgin en Burkes gevolg en die gesprek tussen hom en Borgin afgeluister het.

Toe hy klaar gepraat is, lyk professor McGonagall ietwat verward.

“Malfoy het iets vir herstel na Borgin en Burkes geneem?”

“Nee, professor, hy wou net hê Borgin moes hom vertel hoe om iets reg te maak; hy het dit nie by hom gehad nie. Maar dis nie die punt nie; die ding is dat hy terselfdertyd iets gekoop het en ek dink dit was daardie halssnoer –”

“Het julle Malfoy met ’n soortgelyke pakkie by die winkel sien uitstap?”

“Nee, professor, hy’t gesê Borgin moet dit vir hom in die winkel hou –”

“Maar Harry,” val Hermione hom in die rede, “Borgin het gevra of hy dit saam met hom wil vat, en Malfoy het nee gesê –”

“Natuurlik omdat hy nie daaraan wou vat nie!” sê Harry vies.

“Wat hy eintlik gesê het, was: ‘Hoe sal ek lyk as ek dit in die straat af dra?’” sê Hermione.

“Wel, hy sal bietjie soos ’n bobbejaan met ’n halssnoer aan lyk,” grinnik Ron.

“Komaan, Ron,” sê Hermione en sug, “dit sou toegedraai gewees

het sodat hy nie daaraan hoef raak nie en dit maklik in sy mantel kon wegsteek sodat niemand dit kon sien nie! Ek dink wat hy ook al by Borgin en Burkes gereserveer het, maak 'n geraas en is groot; hy het geweet hy sal aandag trek as hy daarmee in die straat af loop – en in elk geval,” gaan sy hard aan sodat Harry haar nie in die rede kan val nie, “ek het Borgin oor die halssnoer uitgevra, onthou julle? Toe ek in is om te probeer uitvind wat Malfoy hom gevra het om te hou, het ek dit daar gesien. En Borgin het net vir my gesê hoeveel dit kos; hy't nie gesê dis al klaar verkoop of iets nie –”

“Wel, jy was so blatant dat hy sommer binne die eerste vyf sekondes geweet het wat jy in die mou voer, so toe het hy jou natuurlik nie vertel nie – in elk geval, Malfoy kon dit daarna laat haal het –”

“Dis genoeg!” sê professor McGonagall vererg toe Hermione haar mond oopmaak om te antwoord. “Potter, ek waardeer dit dat jy my daarvan vertel het, maar ons kan nie vir meneer Malfoy die skuld gee bloot omdat hy in die winkel was waar hierdie halssnoer miskien gekoop is nie. Dieselfde is waarskynlik waar van honderde ander mense –”

“– nes ek gesê het –” mompel Ron.

“– en in elk geval, ons het vanjaar streng veiligheidsmaatreëls ingestel. Ek twyfel of daardie halssnoer sonder ons wete by die skool sou ingekom het –”

“– maar –”

“– en wat meer is,” sê professor McGonagall met 'n houding van aaklige finaliteit, “meneer Malfoy was nie vandag in Hogsmeade nie.”

Harry gaap haar verslae aan.

“Hoe weet professor dit?”

“Want hy was by my vir detensie. Hy het twee keer ná mekaar nie sy huiswerk vir Transfigurasie klaargemaak nie. Dankie dat jy my van jou vermoedens vertel het, Potter,” sê sy terwyl sy doelgerig verby hulle loop, “maar ek moet nou na die siekeboeg toe gaan om te kyk hoe dit met Katie Bell gaan. Goiedag, almal.”

Sy hou die kantoordeur oop. Hulle het nie 'n ander keuse as om woordeloos agter mekaar uit te loop nie.

Harry is kwaad dat die ander twee McGonagall se kant gekies het; hy gesels nogtans saam toe hulle begin praat oor wat gebeur het.

“Vir wie dink julle moes Katie die halssnoer gegee het?” vra Ron terwyl hulle met die trap op na die geselskamer toe loop.

“Nugter alleen weet,” sê Hermione. “Maar wie dit ook al was, het 'n noue ontkoming gehad. Niemand sou daardie pakkie kon oopmaak sonder om aan die halssnoer te raak nie.”

“Dit kon vir baie mense bedoel gewees het,” sê Harry. “Vir Dumbledore – die Doodseters sal baie graag van hom ontslae wil raak; hy is een van hul topteikens. Of vir Slughorn – Dumbledore reken Voldemort wou hom regtig graag hê, en hulle sal woedend wees dat hy hom by Dumbledore geskaar het. Of vir –”

“Of vir jou,” sê Hermione en lyk gespanne.

“Kan nie wees nie,” sê Harry, “anders sou Katie net in die pad omgedraai en dit vir my gegee het, nie waar nie? Ek was heelpad van die Drie Besemstokke af agter haar. Dit sou baie meer sin gemaak het om die pakkie buitekant Hogwarts af te lewer, want Filch deursoek almal wat hier in- en uitkom. Ek wonder hoekom Malfoy gesê het sy moet dit by die kasteel inbring?”

“Harry, Malfoy was nie in Hogsmeade nie!” sê Hermione en stamp haar voet van frustrasie.

“Dan moet hy ’n helper hê,” sê Harry. “Crabbe of Goyle – of, noudat ek daaraan dink, ’n ander Doodseter. Hy sal baie beter pêle as Crabbe en Goyle hê noudat hy aangesluit het –”

Ron en Hermione gee mekaar ’n kyk wat sê: “Dit help nie om met hom te stry nie”.

“Draakdroesem,” sê Hermione ferm toe hulle by die Vet Vrou kom.

Die portret swaai oop en hulle klim deur tot in die geselskamer. Die vertrek is nogal vol en ruik na klam klere; baie studente het vroeg van Hogsmeade af teruggekom omdat die weer so sleg is. Maar daar is egter geen angstige gepraat of spekulasie nie; die nuus van wat met Katie gebeur het, het duidelik nog nie versprei nie.

“As jy daaroor dink, was dit nie eintlik ’n baie goed beplande aanval nie,” sê Ron en boender ’n eerstejaar doodluiters uit een van die gemaklike leunstoel by die kaggelvuur sodat hy daar kan sit. “Die vloek het dit nie eers tot hier in die kasteel gemaak nie. Nie juis wat jy flatervry sal noem nie.”

“Jy’s reg,” sê Hermione terwyl sy Ron met haar voet uit die stoel verjaag en dit weer vir die eerstejaar aanbied. “Dit was glad nie baie goed uitgedink nie.”

“Maar van wanneer af is Malfoy een van die wêreld se grootste denkers?” vra Harry.

Nie Ron óf Hermione antwoord hom nie.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



THE SECRET RIDDLE

Katie was removed to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries the following day, by which time the news that she had been cursed had spread all over the school, though the details were confused and nobody other than Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Leanne seemed to know that Katie herself had not been the intended target.

"Oh, and Malfoy knows, of course," said Harry to Ron and Hermione, who continued their new policy of feigning deafness whenever Harry mentioned his Malfoy-Is-a-Death-Eater theory.

Harry had wondered whether Dumbledore would return from wherever he had been in time for Monday night's lesson, but having had no word to the contrary, he presented himself outside Dumbledore's office at eight o'clock, knocked, and was told to enter.

There sat Dumbledore looking unusually tired; his hand was as black and burned as ever, but he smiled when he gestured to Harry to sit down. The Pensieve was sitting on the desk again, casting silvery specks of light over the ceiling.

“You have had a busy time while I have been away,” Dumbledore said. “I believe you witnessed Katie’s accident.”

“Yes, sir. How is she?”

“Still very unwell, although she was relatively lucky. She appears to have brushed the necklace with the smallest possible amount of skin: There was a tiny hole in her glove. Had she put it on, had she even held it in her ungloved hand, she would have died, perhaps instantly. Luckily Professor Snape was able to do enough to prevent a rapid spread of the curse —”

“Why him?” asked Harry quickly. “Why not Madam Pomfrey?”

“Impertinent,” said a soft voice from one of the portraits on the wall, and Phineas Nigellus Black, Sirius’s great-great-grandfather, raised his head from his arms where he had appeared to be sleeping. “I would not have permitted a student to question the way Hogwarts operated in my day.”

“Yes, thank you, Phineas,” said Dumbledore quellingly. “Professor Snape knows much more about the Dark Arts than Madam Pomfrey, Harry. Anyway, the St. Mungo’s staff are sending me hourly reports, and I am hopeful that Katie will make a full recovery in time.”

“Where were you this weekend, sir?” Harry asked, disregarding a strong feeling that he might be pushing his luck, a feeling apparently shared by Phineas Nigellus, who hissed softly.

“I would rather not say just now,” said Dumbledore. “However, I

shall tell you in due course.”

“You will?” said Harry, startled.

“Yes, I expect so,” said Dumbledore, withdrawing a fresh bottle of silver memories from inside his robes and uncorking it with a prod of his wand.

“Sir,” said Harry tentatively, “I met Mundungus in Hogsmeade.”

“Ah yes, I am already aware that Mundungus has been treating your inheritance with light-fingered contempt,” said Dumbledore, frowning a little. “He has gone to ground since you accosted him outside the Three Broomsticks; I rather think he dreads facing me. However, rest assured that he will not be making away with any more of Sirius’s old possessions.”

“That mangy old half-blood has been stealing Black heirlooms?” said Phineas Nigellus, incensed; and he stalked out of his frame, undoubtedly to visit his portrait in number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

“Professor,” said Harry, after a short pause, “did Professor McGonagall tell you what I told her after Katie got hurt? About Draco Malfoy?”

“She told me of your suspicions, yes,” said Dumbledore.

“And do you — ?”

“I shall take all appropriate measures to investigate anyone who might have had a hand in Katie’s accident,” said Dumbledore. “But what concerns me now, Harry, is our lesson.”

Harry felt slightly resentful at this: If their lessons were so very important, why had there been such a long gap between the first and second? However, he said no more about Draco Malfoy, but watched as Dumbledore poured the fresh memories into the Pensieve and

began swirling the stone basin once more between his long-fingered hands.

“You will remember, I am sure, that we left the tale of Lord Voldemort’s beginnings at the point where the handsome Muggle, Tom Riddle, had abandoned his witch wife, Merope, and returned to his family home in Little Hangleton. Merope was left alone in London, expecting the baby who would one day become Lord Voldemort.”

“How do you know she was in London, sir?”

“Because of the evidence of one Caractacus Burke,” said Dumbledore, “who, by an odd coincidence, helped found the very shop whence came the necklace we have just been discussing.”

He swilled the contents of the Pensieve as Harry had seen him swill them before, much as a gold prospector sifts for gold. Up out of the swirling, silvery mass rose a little old man revolving slowly in the Pensieve, silver as a ghost but much more solid, with a thatch of hair that completely covered his eyes.

“Yes, we acquired it in curious circumstances. It was brought in by a young witch just before Christmas, oh, many years ago now. She said she needed the gold badly, well, that much was obvious. Covered in rags and pretty far along . . . Going to have a baby, see. She said the locket had been Slytherin’s. Well, we hear that sort of story all the time, ‘Oh, this was Merlin’s, this was, his favorite teapot,’ but when I looked at it, it had his mark all right, and a few simple spells were enough to tell me the truth. Of course, that made it near enough priceless. She didn’t seem to have any idea how much it was worth. Happy to get ten Galleons for it. Best bargain we ever

made!”

Dumbledore gave the Pensieve an extra-vigorous shake and Caractacus Burke descended back into the swirling mass of memory from whence he had come.

“He only gave her ten Galleons?” said Harry indignantly.

“Caractacus Burke was not famed for his generosity,” said Dumbledore. “So we know that, near the end of her pregnancy, Merope was alone in London and in desperate need of gold, desperate enough to sell her one and only valuable possession, the locket that was one of Marvolo’s treasured family heirlooms.”

“But she could do magic!” said Harry impatiently. “She could have got food and everything for herself by magic, couldn’t she?”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore, “perhaps she could. But it is my belief — I am guessing again, but I am sure I am right — that when her husband abandoned her, Merope stopped using magic. I do not think that she wanted to be a witch any longer. Of course, it is also possible that her unrequited love and the attendant despair sapped her of her powers; that can happen. In any case, as you are about to see, Merope refused to raise her wand even to save her own life.”

“She wouldn’t even stay alive for her son?”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “Could you possibly be feeling sorry for Lord Voldemort?”

“No,” said Harry quickly, “but she had a choice, didn’t she, not like my mother —”

“Your mother had a choice too,” said Dumbledore gently. “Yes, Merope Riddle chose death in spite of a son who needed her, but do not judge her too harshly, Harry. She was greatly weakened by long

suffering and she never had your mother's courage. And now, if you will stand . . .”

“Where are we going?” Harry asked, as Dumbledore joined him at the front of the desk.

“This time,” said Dumbledore, “we are going to enter *my* memory. I think you will find it both rich in detail and satisfyingly accurate. After you, Harry . . .”

Harry bent over the Pensieve; his face broke the cool surface of the memory and then he was falling through darkness again. . . . Seconds later, his feet hit firm ground; he opened his eyes and found that he and Dumbledore were standing in a bustling, old-fashioned London street.

“There I am,” said Dumbledore brightly, pointing ahead of them to a tall figure crossing the road in front of a horse-drawn milk cart.

This younger Albus Dumbledore's long hair and beard were auburn. Having reached their side of the street, he strode off along the pavement, drawing many curious glances due to the flamboyantly cut suit of plum velvet that he was wearing.

“Nice suit, sir,” said Harry, before he could stop himself, but Dumbledore merely chuckled as they followed his younger self a short distance, finally passing through a set of iron gates into a bare courtyard that fronted a rather grim, square building surrounded by high railings. He mounted the few steps leading to the front door and knocked once. After a moment or two, the door was opened by a scruffy girl wearing an apron.

“Good afternoon. I have an appointment with a Mrs. Cole, who, I believe, is the matron here?”

“Oh,” said the bewildered-looking girl, taking in Dumbledore’s eccentric appearance. “Um . . . just a mo’ . . . MRS. COLE!” she bellowed over her shoulder.

Harry heard a distant voice shouting something in response. The girl turned back to Dumbledore. “Come in, she’s on ’er way.”

Dumbledore stepped into a hallway tiled in black and white; the whole place was shabby but spotlessly clean. Harry and the older Dumbledore followed. Before the front door had closed behind them, a skinny, harassed-looking woman came scurrying toward them. She had a sharp-featured face that appeared more anxious than unkind, and she was talking over her shoulder to another aproned helper as she walked toward Dumbledore.

“. . . and take the iodine upstairs to Martha, Billy Stubbs has been picking his scabs and Eric Whalley’s oozing all over his sheets — chicken pox on top of everything else,” she said to nobody in particular, and then her eyes fell upon Dumbledore and she stopped dead in her tracks, looking as astonished as if a giraffe had just crossed her threshold.

“Good afternoon,” said Dumbledore, holding out his hand.

Mrs. Cole simply gaped.

“My name is Albus Dumbledore. I sent you a letter requesting an appointment and you very kindly invited me here today.”

Mrs. Cole blinked. Apparently deciding that Dumbledore was not a hallucination, she said feebly, “Oh yes. Well — well then — you’d better come into my room. Yes.”

She led Dumbledore into a small room that seemed part sitting room, part office. It was as shabby as the hallway and the furniture

was old and mismatched. She invited Dumbledore to sit on a rickety chair and seated herself behind a cluttered desk, eyeing him nervously.

“I am here, as I told you in my letter, to discuss Tom Riddle and arrangements for his future,” said Dumbledore.

“Are you family?” asked Mrs. Cole.

“No, I am a teacher,” said Dumbledore. “I have come to offer Tom a place at my school.”

“What school’s this, then?”

“It is called Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore.

“And how come you’re interested in Tom?”

“We believe he has qualities we are looking for.”

“You mean he’s won a scholarship? How can he have done? He’s never been entered for one.”

“Well, his name has been down for our school since birth —”

“Who registered him? His parents?”

There was no doubt that Mrs. Cole was an inconveniently sharp woman. Apparently Dumbledore thought so too, for Harry now saw him slip his wand out of the pocket of his velvet suit, at the same time picking up a piece of perfectly blank paper from Mrs. Cole’s desktop.

“Here,” said Dumbledore, waving his wand once as he passed her the piece of paper, “I think this will make everything clear.”

Mrs. Cole’s eyes slid out of focus and back again as she gazed intently at the blank paper for a moment.

“That seems perfectly in order,” she said placidly, handing it back.

Then her eyes fell upon a bottle of gin and two glasses that had certainly not been present a few seconds before.

“Er — may I offer you a glass of gin?” she said in an extra-refined voice.

“Thank you very much,” said Dumbledore, beaming.

It soon became clear that Mrs. Cole was no novice when it came to gin drinking. Pouring both of them a generous measure, she drained her own glass in one gulp. Smacking her lips frankly, she smiled at Dumbledore for the first time, and he didn’t hesitate to press his advantage.

“I was wondering whether you could tell me anything of Tom Riddle’s history? I think he was born here in the orphanage?”

“That’s right,” said Mrs. Cole, helping herself to more gin. “I remember it clear as anything, because I’d just started here myself. New Year’s Eve and bitter cold, snowing, you know. Nasty night. And this girl, not much older than I was myself at the time, came staggering up the front steps. Well, she wasn’t the first. We took her in, and she had the baby within the hour. And she was dead in another hour.”

Mrs. Cole nodded impressively and took another generous gulp of gin.

“Did she say anything before she died?” asked Dumbledore. “Anything about the boy’s father, for instance?”

“Now, as it happens, she did,” said Mrs. Cole, who seemed to be rather enjoying herself now, with the gin in her hand and an eager audience for her story. “I remember she said to me, ‘I hope he looks like his papa,’ and I won’t lie, she was right to hope it, because she

was no beauty — and then she told me he was to be named Tom, for his father, and Marvolo, for *her* father — yes, I know, funny name, isn't it? We wondered whether she came from a circus — and she said the boy's surname was to be Riddle. And she died soon after that without another word.

“Well, we named him just as she'd said, it seemed so important to the poor girl, but no Tom nor Marvolo nor any kind of Riddle ever came looking for him, nor any family at all, so he stayed in the orphanage and he's been here ever since.”

Mrs. Cole helped herself, almost absentmindedly, to another healthy measure of gin. Two pink spots had appeared high on her cheekbones. Then she said, “He's a funny boy.”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. “I thought he might be.”

“He was a funny baby too. He hardly ever cried, you know. And then, when he got a little older, he was . . . odd.”

“Odd in what way?” asked Dumbledore gently.

“Well, he —”

But Mrs. Cole pulled up short, and there was nothing blurry or vague about the inquisitorial glance she shot Dumbledore over her gin glass.

“He's definitely got a place at your school, you say?”

“Definitely,” said Dumbledore.

“And nothing I say can change that?”

“Nothing,” said Dumbledore.

“You'll be taking him away, whatever?”

“Whatever,” repeated Dumbledore gravely.

She squinted at him as though deciding whether or not to trust him. Apparently she decided she could, because she said in a sudden rush, “He scares the other children.”

“You mean he is a bully?” asked Dumbledore.

“I think he must be,” said Mrs. Cole, frowning slightly, “but it’s very hard to catch him at it. There have been incidents. . . . Nasty things . . .”

Dumbledore did not press her, though Harry could tell that he was interested. She took yet another gulp of gin and her rosy cheeks grew rosier still.

“Billy Stubbs’s rabbit . . . well, Tom *said* he didn’t do it and I don’t see how he could have done, but even so, it didn’t hang itself from the rafters, did it?”

“I shouldn’t think so, no,” said Dumbledore quietly.

“But I’m jiggered if I know how he got up there to do it. All I know is he and Billy had argued the day before. And then” — Mrs. Cole took another swig of gin, slopping a little over her chin this time — “on the summer outing — we take them out, you know, once a year, to the countryside or to the seaside — well, Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop were never quite right afterwards, and all we ever got out of them was that they’d gone into a cave with Tom Riddle. He swore they’d just gone exploring, but *something* happened in there, I’m sure of it. And, well, there have been a lot of things, funny things. . . .”

She looked around at Dumbledore again, and though her cheeks were flushed, her gaze was steady. “I don’t think many people will be sorry to see the back of him.”

“You understand, I’m sure, that we will not be keeping him permanently?” said Dumbledore. “He will have to return here, at the very least, every summer.”

“Oh, well, that’s better than a whack on the nose with a rusty poker,” said Mrs. Cole with a slight hiccup. She got to her feet, and Harry was impressed to see that she was quite steady, even though two-thirds of the gin was now gone. “I suppose you’d like to see him?”

“Very much,” said Dumbledore, rising too.

She led him out of her office and up the stone stairs, calling out instructions and admonitions to helpers and children as she passed. The orphans, Harry saw, were all wearing the same kind of grayish tunic. They looked reasonably well-cared for, but there was no denying that this was a grim place in which to grow up.

“Here we are,” said Mrs. Cole, as they turned off the second landing and stopped outside the first door in a long corridor. She knocked twice and entered.

“Tom? You’ve got a visitor. This is Mr. Dumberton — sorry, Dunderbore. He’s come to tell you — well, I’ll let him do it.”

Harry and the two Dumbledores entered the room, and Mrs. Cole closed the door on them. It was a small bare room with nothing in it except an old wardrobe, a wooden chair, and an iron bedstead. A boy was sitting on top of the gray blankets, his legs stretched out in front of him, holding a book.

There was no trace of the Gaunts in Tom Riddle’s face. Merope had got her dying wish: He was his handsome father in miniature, tall for eleven years old, dark-haired, and pale. His eyes narrowed

slightly as he took in Dumbledore's eccentric appearance. There was a moment's silence.

"How do you do, Tom?" said Dumbledore, walking forward and holding out his hand.

The boy hesitated, then took it, and they shook hands. Dumbledore drew up the hard wooden chair beside Riddle, so that the pair of them looked rather like a hospital patient and visitor.

"I am Professor Dumbledore."

"'Professor'?" repeated Riddle. He looked wary. "Is that like 'doctor'? What are you here for? Did *she* get you in to have a look at me?"

He was pointing at the door through which Mrs. Cole had just left.

"No, no," said Dumbledore, smiling.

"I don't believe you," said Riddle. "She wants me looked at, doesn't she? Tell the truth!"

He spoke the last three words with a ringing force that was almost shocking. It was a command, and it sounded as though he had given it many times before. His eyes had widened and he was glaring at Dumbledore, who made no response except to continue smiling pleasantly. After a few seconds Riddle stopped glaring, though he looked, if anything, warier still.

"Who are you?"

"I have told you. My name is Professor Dumbledore and I work at a school called Hogwarts. I have come to offer you a place at my school — your new school, if you would like to come."

Riddle's reaction to this was most surprising. He leapt from the bed and backed away from Dumbledore, looking furious.

“You can’t kid me! The asylum, that’s where you’re from, isn’t it? ‘Professor,’ yes, of course — well, I’m not going, see? That old cat’s the one who should be in the asylum. I never did anything to little Amy Benson or Dennis Bishop, and you can ask them, they’ll tell you!”

“I am not from the asylum,” said Dumbledore patiently. “I am a teacher and, if you will sit down calmly, I shall tell you about Hogwarts. Of course, if you would rather not come to the school, nobody will force you —”

“I’d like to see them try,” sneered Riddle.

“Hogwarts,” Dumbledore went on, as though he had not heard Riddle’s last words, “is a school for people with special abilities —”

“I’m not mad!”

“I know that you are not mad. Hogwarts is not a school for mad people. It is a school of magic.”

There was silence. Riddle had frozen, his face expressionless, but his eyes were flickering back and forth between each of Dumbledore’s, as though trying to catch one of them lying.

“Magic?” he repeated in a whisper.

“That’s right,” said Dumbledore.

“It’s . . . it’s magic, what I can do?”

“What is it that you can do?”

“All sorts,” breathed Riddle. A flush of excitement was rising up his neck into his hollow cheeks; he looked fevered. “I can make things move without touching them. I can make animals do what I want them to do, without training them. I can make bad things happen

to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to.”

His legs were trembling. He stumbled forward and sat down on the bed again, staring at his hands, his head bowed as though in prayer.

“I knew I was different,” he whispered to his own quivering fingers. “I knew I was special. Always, I knew there was something.”

“Well, you were quite right,” said Dumbledore, who was no longer smiling, but watching Riddle intently. “You are a wizard.”

Riddle lifted his head. His face was transfigured: There was a wild happiness upon it, yet for some reason it did not make him better looking; on the contrary, his finely carved features seemed somehow rougher, his expression almost bestial.

“Are you a wizard too?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Prove it,” said Riddle at once, in the same commanding tone he had used when he had said, “Tell the truth.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “If, as I take it, you are accepting your place at Hogwarts —”

“Of course I am!”

“Then you will address me as ‘Professor’ or ‘sir.’”

Riddle’s expression hardened for the most fleeting moment before he said, in an unrecognizably polite voice, “I’m sorry, sir. I meant — please, Professor, could you show me — ?”

Harry was sure that Dumbledore was going to refuse, that he would tell Riddle there would be plenty of time for practical demonstrations at Hogwarts, that they were currently in a building

full of Muggles and must therefore be cautious. To his great surprise, however, Dumbledore drew his wand from an inside pocket of his suit jacket, pointed it at the shabby wardrobe in the corner, and gave the wand a casual flick.

The wardrobe burst into flames.

Riddle jumped to his feet; Harry could hardly blame him for howling in shock and rage; all his worldly possessions must be in there. But even as Riddle rounded on Dumbledore, the flames vanished, leaving the wardrobe completely undamaged.

Riddle stared from the wardrobe to Dumbledore; then, his expression greedy, he pointed at the wand. "Where can I get one of them?"

"All in good time," said Dumbledore. "I think there is something trying to get out of your wardrobe."

And sure enough, a faint rattling could be heard from inside it. For the first time, Riddle looked frightened.

"Open the door," said Dumbledore.

Riddle hesitated, then crossed the room and threw open the wardrobe door. On the topmost shelf, above a rail of threadbare clothes, a small cardboard box was shaking and rattling as though there were several frantic mice trapped inside it.

"Take it out," said Dumbledore.

Riddle took down the quaking box. He looked unnerved.

"Is there anything in that box that you ought not to have?" asked Dumbledore.

Riddle threw Dumbledore a long, clear, calculating look. "Yes, I suppose so, sir," he said finally, in an expressionless voice.

“Open it,” said Dumbledore.

Riddle took off the lid and tipped the contents onto his bed without looking at them. Harry, who had expected something much more exciting, saw a mess of small, everyday objects: a yo-yo, a silver thimble, and a tarnished mouth organ among them. Once free of the box, they stopped quivering and lay quite still upon the thin blankets.

“You will return them to their owners with your apologies,” said Dumbledore calmly, putting his wand back into his jacket. “I shall know whether it has been done. And be warned: Thieving is not tolerated at Hogwarts.”

Riddle did not look remotely abashed; he was still staring coldly and appraisingly at Dumbledore. At last he said in a colorless voice, “Yes, sir.”

“At Hogwarts,” Dumbledore went on, “we teach you not only to use magic, but to control it. You have — inadvertently, I am sure — been using your powers in a way that is neither taught nor tolerated at our school. You are not the first, nor will you be the last, to allow your magic to run away with you. But you should know that Hogwarts can expel students, and the Ministry of Magic — yes, there is a Ministry — will punish lawbreakers still more severely. All new wizards must accept that, in entering our world, they abide by our laws.”

“Yes, sir,” said Riddle again.

It was impossible to tell what he was thinking; his face remained quite blank as he put the little cache of stolen objects back into the cardboard box. When he had finished, he turned to Dumbledore and said baldly, “I haven’t got any money.”

“That is easily remedied,” said Dumbledore, drawing a leather money-pouch from his pocket. “There is a fund at Hogwarts for those who require assistance to buy books and robes. You might have to buy some of your spellbooks and so on secondhand, but —”

“Where do you buy spellbooks?” interrupted Riddle, who had taken the heavy money bag without thanking Dumbledore, and was now examining a fat gold Galleon.

“In Diagon Alley,” said Dumbledore. “I have your list of books and school equipment with me. I can help you find everything —”

“You’re coming with me?” asked Riddle, looking up.

“Certainly, if you —”

“I don’t need you,” said Riddle. “I’m used to doing things for myself, I go round London on my own all the time. How do you get to this Diagon Alley — sir?” he added, catching Dumbledore’s eye.

Harry thought that Dumbledore would insist upon accompanying Riddle, but once again he was surprised. Dumbledore handed Riddle the envelope containing his list of equipment, and after telling Riddle exactly how to get to the Leaky Cauldron from the orphanage, he said, “You will be able to see it, although Muggles around you — non-magical people, that is — will not. Ask for Tom the barman — easy enough to remember, as he shares your name —”

Riddle gave an irritable twitch, as though trying to displace an irksome fly.

“You dislike the name ‘Tom’?”

“There are a lot of Toms,” muttered Riddle. Then, as though he could not suppress the question, as though it burst from him in spite of himself, he asked, “Was my father a wizard? He was called Tom

Riddle too, they've told me."

"I'm afraid I don't know," said Dumbledore, his voice gentle.

"My mother can't have been magic, or she wouldn't have died," said Riddle, more to himself than Dumbledore. "It must've been him. So — when I've got all my stuff — when do I come to this Hogwarts?"

"All the details are on the second piece of parchment in your envelope," said Dumbledore. "You will leave from King's Cross Station on the first of September. There is a train ticket in there too."

Riddle nodded. Dumbledore got to his feet and held out his hand again. Taking it, Riddle said, "I can speak to snakes. I found out when we've been to the country on trips — they find me, they whisper to me. Is that normal for a wizard?"

Harry could tell that he had withheld mention of this strangest power until that moment, determined to impress.

"It is unusual," said Dumbledore, after a moment's hesitation, "but not unheard of."

His tone was casual but his eyes moved curiously over Riddle's face. They stood for a moment, man and boy, staring at each other. Then the handshake was broken; Dumbledore was at the door.

"Good-bye, Tom. I shall see you at Hogwarts."

"I think that will do," said the white-haired Dumbledore at Harry's side, and seconds later, they were soaring weightlessly through darkness once more, before landing squarely in the present-day office.

"Sit down," said Dumbledore, landing beside Harry.

Harry obeyed, his mind still full of what he had just seen.

“He believed it much quicker than I did — I mean, when you told him he was a wizard,” said Harry. “I didn’t believe Hagrid at first, when he told me.”

“Yes, Riddle was perfectly ready to believe that he was — to use his word — ‘special,’” said Dumbledore.

“Did you know — then?” asked Harry.

“Did I know that I had just met the most dangerous Dark wizard of all time?” said Dumbledore. “No, I had no idea that he was to grow up to be what he is. However, I was certainly intrigued by him. I returned to Hogwarts intending to keep an eye upon him, something I should have done in any case, given that he was alone and friendless, but which, already, I felt I ought to do for others’ sake as much as his.

“His powers, as you heard, were surprisingly well-developed for such a young wizard and — most interestingly and ominously of all — he had already discovered that he had some measure of control over them, and begun to use them consciously. And as you saw, they were not the random experiments typical of young wizards: He was already using magic against other people, to frighten, to punish, to control. The little stories of the strangled rabbit and the young boy and girl he lured into a cave were most suggestive. . . . *‘I can make them hurt if I want to. . . .’*”

“And he was a Parselmouth,” interjected Harry.

“Yes, indeed; a rare ability, and one supposedly connected with the Dark Arts, although as we know, there are Parselmouths among the great and the good too. In fact, his ability to speak to serpents did not make me nearly as uneasy as his obvious instincts for cruelty, secrecy, and domination.

“Time is making fools of us again,” said Dumbledore, indicating the dark sky beyond the windows. “But before we part, I want to draw your attention to certain features of the scene we have just witnessed, for they have a great bearing on the matters we shall be discussing in future meetings.

“Firstly, I hope you noticed Riddle’s reaction when I mentioned that another shared his first name, ‘Tom’?”

Harry nodded.

“There he showed his contempt for anything that tied him to other people, anything that made him ordinary. Even then, he wished to be different, separate, notorious. He shed his name, as you know, within a few short years of that conversation and created the mask of ‘Lord Voldemort’ behind which he has been hidden for so long.

“I trust that you also noticed that Tom Riddle was already highly self-sufficient, secretive, and, apparently, friendless? He did not want help or companionship on his trip to Diagon Alley. He preferred to operate alone. The adult Voldemort is the same. You will hear many of his Death Eaters claiming that they are in his confidence, that they alone are close to him, even understand him. They are deluded. Lord Voldemort has never had a friend, nor do I believe that he has ever wanted one.

“And lastly — I hope you are not too sleepy to pay attention to this, Harry — the young Tom Riddle liked to collect trophies. You saw the box of stolen articles he had hidden in his room. These were taken from victims of his bullying behavior, souvenirs, if you will, of particularly unpleasant bits of magic. Bear in mind this magpie-like tendency, for this, particularly, will be important later.

“And now, it really is time for bed.”

Harry got to his feet. As he walked across the room, his eyes fell upon the little table on which Marvolo Gaunt’s ring had rested last time, but the ring was no longer there.

“Yes, Harry?” said Dumbledore, for Harry had come to a halt.

“The ring’s gone,” said Harry, looking around. “But I thought you might have the mouth organ or something.”

Dumbledore beamed at him, peering over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

“Very astute, Harry, but the mouth organ was only ever a mouth organ.”

And on that enigmatic note he waved to Harry, who understood himself to be dismissed.

Die Geheimsinnige Riddle

Katie word die volgende dag na Sint Mungo se Hospitaal vir Magiese Kwinte en Kwale oorgeplaas en teen hierdie tyd het die nuus dat sy vervloek is al deur die hele skool versprei, hoewel die besonderhede vaag is en net Harry, Ron, Hermione en Leanne blykbaar weet dat Katie self nie die beoogde slagoffer was nie.

“O, en Malfoy weet natuurlik ook,” sê Harry vir Ron en Hermione, wat voortgaan met hul nuwe beleid om te maak of hulle doof is elke keer dat Harry sy Malfoy-is-’n-Doodseter-teorie opper.

Harry wonder of Dumbledore betyds sal terugkom van waar hy ook al is vir Maandagaand se les, maar aangesien hy nie die teendeel hoor nie, staan hy agtuur voor Dumbledore se deur, klop en word aangesê om in te kom. Dumbledore sit daar en lyk buitengewoon moeg; sy hand is nog net so swart en verbrand soos altyd, maar hy glimlag toe hy vir Harry beduie om te kom sit. Die Peinssif staan weer op sy lessenaar en gooi silwer ligspikkels teen die plafon.

“Jy was baie besig in my afwesigheid,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek hoor jy het gesien wat met Katie gebeur het.”

“Ja, professor. Hoe gaan dit met haar?”

“Sy is nog steeds baie ongesteld, maar sy was relatief gelukkig. Blykbaar het net ’n baie klein stukkie van haar vel aan die halsnoer geraak: daar was ’n gaatjie in haar handskoen. As sy dit om haar nek gesit of dit met haar kaal hand opgetel het, sou sy dood gewees het, heel moontlik op slag. Gelukkig kon professor Snape keer dat die vloek te vinnig versprei —”

“Hoekom hy?” vra Harry dadelik. “Hoekom nie Madame Pomfrey nie?”

“Vrypostig,” sê ’n sagte stem uit een van die portrette teen die muur en Phineas Nigellus Black, Sirius se oor-oorgrootjie lig sy kop van sy arms waarop hy oënskynlik gelê en slaap het. “Op my dag sou ek nooit ’n student toegelaat het om die manier waarop dinge by Hogwarts gedoen word, te bevraagteken nie.”

“Ja dankie, Phineas,” sê Dumbledore gedemp. “Professor Snape weet baie meer as Madame Pomfrey van die Donker Kunste, Harry. Buitendien, Sint Mungo se personeel stuur uurliks vir my verslae en ek hoop Katie sal mettertyd weer ten volle herstel.”

“Waar was professor die naweek?” vra Harry ondanks ’n sterk gevoel dat hy sy geluk nou lelik op die proef stel. Phineas Nigellus dink blykbaar ook so, want hy sis sag.

“Ek verkies om jou nie nou te vertel nie,” sê Dumbledore, “maar ek sal dit wel te gelegener tyd doen.”

“Sal professor?” vra Harry verbaas.

“Ja, ek glo so,” sê Dumbledore. Hy haal ’n nuwe bottel silwer herinneringe uit sy kleed en verwyder die prop met ’n tik van sy towerstaf.

“Professor,” sê Harry versigtig, “ek het Mundungus in Hogsmeade raakgeloop.”

“A ja, ek is reeds daarvan bewus dat Mundungus jou erflating met lang vingers en minagting behandel,” sê Dumbledore en frons effens. “Hy kruip weg vandat jy hom buite die Drie Besemstokke bygedam het; ek vermoed hy probeer my vermy. Maar wees verseker, hy sal nie met nóg van Sirius se ou besittings wegkom nie.”

“Steel daardie brandsiek halfbloeder Black-erfstukke?” vra Phineas Nigellus gebelgd en hy loop ontsteld uit sy raam, ongetwyfeld om sy portret in Grimmauldplein twaalf te gaan besoek.

“Professor,” sê Harry ná ’n kort pouse, “het professor McGonagall vir u gesê wat ek haar vertel het ná Katie seergekry het? Van Draco Malfoy?”

“Ja, sy het my van jou vermoedens vertel,” sê Dumbledore.

“En dink u – ?”

“Ek sal al die gepaste stappe doen om enigiemand wat moontlik ’n aandeel aan Katie se ongeluk gehad het, te ondersoek,” sê Dumbledore. “Maar nou gaan dit vir my oor ons les, Harry.”

Harry voel effens gegrief: As hul lesse so belangrik is, hoekom was daar dan so ’n groot gaping tussen die eerste en tweede een? Hy sê egter niks meer van Draco Malfoy nie en kyk hoe Dumbledore die vars herinneringe in die Peinssif uitgooi en die klipkom dan tussen sy hande met die lang vingers om en om begin draai.

“Ek is seker jy onthou ons het die verhaal van die Heer Voldemort se oorsprong gevolg tot by die punt waar die aantreklike Moggel, Tom Riddle, sy heksvrou, Merope, verlaat en na sy familiehuis in Klein Hangleton teruggekeer het. Merope het alleen in Londen agtergebly en sy was swanger met die baba wat eendag die Heer Voldemort sou word.”

“Hoe weet professor sy was in Londen?”

“Danksy die getuienis van ene Caractus Burke,” sê Dumbledore, “wat deur ’n vreemde sameloop van omstandighede een van die eerste mede-eenaars was van die einste winkel waaruit die halsnoer kom waaroor ons so pas gesels het.”

Hy skommel die Peinssif se inhoud soos wat Harry hom dit al voorheen sien doen het, baie soos ’n goudprospekteerder wat vir goud sif. Uit die skommelende silwer massa verrys daar ’n klein ou mannetjie wat stadig om en om in die Peinssif draai; hy is silwer soos ’n spook, maar baie meer solied, met ’n dik bos hare wat sy oë heeltemal toemaak.

“Ja, ons het dit onder vreemde omstandighede bekom. ’n Jong heks het dit net voor Kersfees ingebring, o, dis nou al baie jare gelede. Sy’t gesê sy het die goud dringend nodig, wel, dit was duidelik. Haar klere was verflenter en sy was taamlik ver ... Sy sou binnekort ’n baba hê, sien. Sy’t gesê die halssnoer het aan Slytherin behoort. Wel, ons hoor gedurig sulke stories: ‘O, dit was Merlin s’n, sy gunstelingteepot,’ maar toe ek daarna kyk, was sy merk sowaar daarop en ’n paar eenvoudige towerspreuke was genoeg om vir my die waarheid te sê. Dit het die halssnoer natuurlik omtrent onbetaalbaar duur gemaak, maar dit het gelyk of sy nie ’n benul het hoeveel dit werd is nie. Bly om tien Galjoene daarvoor te kry. Dit was ons grootste winskopie ooit!”

Dumbledore skud die Peinssif ekstra hard en Caractus Burke daal af in die malende massa herinneringe waaruit hy gekom het.

“Hy het net tien Galjoene vir haar gegee!” sê Harry verontwaardig.

“Caractus Burke was nie bekend vir sy vrygewigheid nie,” sê Dumbledore. “Ons weet dus Merope was naby die einde van haar swangerskap alleen in Londen en sy het desperaat goud nodig gehad, desperaat genoeg om haar enigste besitting, die halssnoer wat een van Marvolo se kosbare familie-erfstukke was, te verkoop.”

“Maar sy kon towerkrag gebruik het!” sê Harry ongeduldig. “Sy kon met towerkrag vir haar kos en alles wat sy nodig gehad het, kry, nie waar nie?”

“Aa,” sê Dumbledore, “miskien kon sy. Maar ek dink – ek raai weer, maar ek is seker ek is reg – Merope het ná haar man haar verlaat het, opgehou om towerkrag te gebruik. Ek dink sy wou nie meer ’n heks wees nie. Dit is natuurlik ook moontlik dat haar onbeantwoorde liefde en die gepaardgaande wanhoop haar van haar towerkragte beroof het; dit kan gebeur. In elk geval, soos wat jy binnekort gaan sien, het Merope geweier om haar towerstaf te lig, selfs om haar eie lewe te red.”

“Wou sy nie eens ter wille van haar seun bly lewe nie?”

Dumbledore lig sy wenkbroue.

“Hoe klink dit my jy kry die Heer Voldemort jammer?”

“Nee,” sê Harry vinnig, “maar sy het ’n keuse gehad, dan nie, anders as my ma –”

“Jou ma het ook ’n keuse gehad,” sê Dumbledore sag. “Ja, Merope Riddle het die dood gekies, ten spyte van ’n seun wat haar nodig gehad het, maar moet haar nie te fel oordeel nie, Harry. Die lang lyding het haar baie swak gemaak en sy het nooit jou ma se moed gehad nie. En nou, as jy sal staan ...”

“Waarheen gaan ons?” vra Harry terwyl Dumbledore langs hom voor die lessenaar kom staan.

“Hierdie keer,” sê Dumbledore, “gaan ons my geheue binne. Ek dink jy sal vind dit is sowel ryk aan detail as bevredigend akkuraat. Jy eerste, Harry ...”

Harry buig oor die Peinssif; sy gesig breek deur die geheue se koel oppervlak en dan val hy weer deur die duisternis ... Sekondes later voel hy vaste grond onder sy voete, maak sy oë oop en vind uit hy en Dumbledore staan in ’n bedrywige straat in die Londen van ouds.

“Daar is ek,” sê Dumbledore vrolik en wys na ’n lang figuur voor hulle wat die straat voor ’n perdekar met melkbottels oorsteek.

Die jong Albus Dumbledore se lang hare en baard is kastaiingsbruin. Noudat hy aan hulle kant van die pad is, stap hy met die sypaadjie langs terwyl hoeveel mense hom nuuskierig aankyk oor die flambojante, pruimkleurige fluweelpak wat hy aanhet.

“Mooi pak, professor,” sê Harry voor hy homself kan keer, maar Dumbledore grinnik net terwyl hulle sy jonger self op ’n kort afstand volg tot hulle uiteindelik deur twee ysterhekke by ’n leë binneplein voor ’n taamlik somber vierkantige gebou wat omring is deur hoë traliewerk instap. Hy bestyg die paar trappies wat na die voordeur lei en klop een keer. ’n Oomblik of twee later maak ’n verslonste meisie met ’n voorskoot aan die deur oop.

“Goeiemiddag. Ek het ’n afspraak met ’n mevrou Cole wat blykbaar die matrone hier is.”

“O,” sê die meisie verwilderd toe sy sien hoe eksentriek Dumbledore aangetrek is. “Em ... net ’n oomblik ... MEVROU COLE!” skree sy oor haar skouer.

Harry hoor ’n veraf stem iets antwoord. Die meisie draai weer na Dumbledore.

“Kom in. Sy’s op pad.”

Dumbledore betree die voorportaal wat swart en wit geteël is; die hele plek is verwaarloos maar silwerskoon. Harry en die ouer

Dumbledore volg. Voor die voordeur agter hulle toegaan, kom 'n brandmaer vrou wat oorstuur lyk na hulle aangeskarrel. Haar gebeitelde gelaatstrekke lyk meer besorg as onvriendelik en sy praat oor haar skouer met nog 'n helper wat ook 'n voorskoot dra terwyl sy na Dumbledore toe kom.

“... en vat die jodium op na Martha toe; Billy Stubbs het sy rowe weer begin afkrap en Eric Whalley se etter loop oral op sy lakens uit – hy't nou boonop waterpokkies ook,” sê sy vir niemand spesifiek nie. Dan val haar oë op Dumbledore en sy steek in haar vier spore vas en lyk so verstom asof daar nou net 'n kameelperd oor haar drumpel getree het.

“Goeiemiddag,” sê Dumbledore en hou sy hand uit.

Mevrou Cole snak net na haar asem.

“My naam is Albus Dumbledore. Ek het aan u geskryf vir 'n afspraak en u was so vriendelik om my vandag hierheen te nooi.”

Mevrou Cole knip haar oë. Sy het blykbaar besluit Dumbledore is nie 'n hallusinاسie nie en sê floutjies: “O ja. Wel – wel, dan – dan beter u na my kantoor toe kom. Ja.”

Sy lei Dumbledore in by 'n klein vertrek wat lyk of dit deels 'n sitkamer en deels 'n kantoor is. Die vertrek is so armoedig soos die voorportaal en die meubels is oud en pas nie bymekaar nie. Sy nooi Dumbledore om op 'n lendelam stoel plaas te neem en sy gaan sit agter 'n lessenaar besaai met papiere en kyk hom senuagtig aan.

“Ek is hier, soos wat ek vir u in my brief gesê het, om Tom Riddle en reëlins vir sy toekoms te bespreek,” sê Dumbledore.

“Is u familie?” vra mevrou Cole.

“Nee, ek is 'n onderwyser,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek het gekom om vir Tom 'n plek in my skool aan te bied.”

“Watse skool is dit nou?”

“Dit word Hogwarts genoem,” sê Dumbledore.

“En hoekom stel u in Tom belang?”

“Ons glo hy het eienskappe waarna ons soek.”

“U bedoel hy het 'n beurs gewen? Hoe is dit moontlik? Hy het nie vir een aansoek gedoen nie.”

“Wel, sy naam is al van geboorte af op ons skool se waglys –”

“Wie het hom geregistreer? Sy ouers?”

Mevrou Cole is kennelik 'n ongemaklike slim vrou. Dumbledore dink blykbaar ook so, want Harry sien hy haal sy towerstaf uit sy fluweelpak se baadjie en tel terselfdertyd 'n silwerskoon vel papier van mevrou Cole se lessenaar af op.

“Hier,” sê Dumbledore en swaai sy towerstaf een keer terwyl hy die vel papier vir haar gee. “Ek dink dit sal alles duidelik maak.”

Mevrou Cole staar vir 'n oomblik stip na die leë papier; haar oë gly uit en dan weer terug in fokus.

“Dit lyk heeltemal in orde,” sê sy rustig en gee dit terug. Dan val haar oë op 'n bottel jenewer en twee glase wat beslis nie 'n paar sekondes gelede daar was nie.

“E – kan ek vir u 'n glasië jenewer aanbied?” vra sy in 'n ekstra verfynde stem.

“Baie dankie,” sê Dumbledore stralend.

Dit word gou duidelik dat mevrou Cole nie 'n beginner is wanneer dit kom by jenewer drink nie. Sy skink vir hulle albei 'n stywe dop en slaan hare met een sluk weg. Sy smak haar lippe openlik, glimlag die eerste keer vir Dumbledore en hy huiwer nie om sy voordeel uit te buit nie.

“Ek het gewonder of u my enigiets van Tom Riddle se geskiedenis kan vertel? Ek dink hy is hier in die weeshuis gebore?”

“Dis reg,” sê mevrou Cole en skink vir haar nog jenewer. “Ek onthou dit nog baie goed, want ek het toe net mooi hier begin werk. Dit was Oujaarsaand. Bitter koud met baie sneeu. Nare nag. En toe kom hierdie meisie wat destyds nie veel ouer as ekself was nie by die voorste trappies opgesukkel. Wel, sy was nie die eerste een nie. Ons het haar ingeneem en sy het die baba binne 'n uur gehad. En binne nog 'n uur was sy dood.”

Mevrou Cole knik gesaghebbend en slaan nog 'n groot sluk jenewer weg.

“Het sy enigiets gesê voor sy dood is?” vra Dumbledore. “Enigiets oor die seun se pa byvoorbeeld?”

“Ja, sy het toevallig,” sê mevrou Cole en dit lyk of sy dit geniet om met die jenewer in haar hand te sit en so 'n gretige gehoor vir haar storie te hê.

“Ek onthou sy het vir my gesê: ‘Ek hoop hy lyk soos sy pa,’ en om eerlik te wees, ek sou ook so gehoop het as ek sy was, want sy was allesbehalwe 'n skoonheid – en toe sê sy hy moet Tom genoem word, soos sy pa, en Marvolo, soos haar pa – ja, ek weet, dis 'n snaakse naam, nè? Ons het gewonder of sy van 'n sirkus af was – en sy't gesê die seun se van moet Riddle wees. En sy's kort daarna dood sonder 'n enkele woord verder.

“Wel, ons het hom toe genoem soos wat sy gesê het; dit het gelyk of dit vir die arme meisie belangrik was, maar g'n Tom of Marvolo of 'n Riddle van enige aard het ooit na hom kom soek nie, ook g'n familie nie. Toe bly hy hier in die weeshuis en hy's tot vandag toe nog hier.”

Mevrou Cole skink, amper ingedagte, vir haar nog 'n stewige

sopie jenewer. Daar is nou twee pienk kolle hoog op haar wangbene. Dan sê sy: "Hy's 'n vreemde seun."

"Ja," sê Dumbledore. "Ek het gedink hy sal wees."

"Hy was 'n vreemde baba ook. Omtrent nooit gehuil nie, weet u. En toe hy effens ouer word, was hy ... eienaardig."

"Eienaardig, op watter manier?" vra Dumbledore versigtig.

"Wel, hy –"

Maar mevrou Cole kom tot besinning en daar is niks onduideliks of vaags aan die ondersoekende kyk wat sy Dumbledore oor haar jenewerglas gee nie.

"U sê daar's definitief vir hom plek in u skool?"

"Definitief," sê Dumbledore.

"En niks wat ek sê, kan dit verander nie?"

"Niks," sê Dumbledore.

"U sal hom wegneem, wat ook al?"

"Wat ook al," herhaal Dumbledore plegtig.

Sy skreef haar oë asof sy probeer besluit of sy hom kan vertrou of nie. Blykbaar besluit sy sy kan, want sy sê skielik vinnig: "Hy maak die ander kinders bang."

"U bedoel hy is afknouereg?" vra Dumbledore.

"Ek dink hy moet wees," sê mevrou Cole en frons effens, "maar dis baie moeilik om hom te betrap. Daar was al voorvalle ... lelike dinge ..."

Dumbledore oefen nie druk op haar uit nie, hoewel Harry kan sien hy stel belang. Sy neem nog 'n groot sluk jenewer en haar rosige wange word nog rooier.

"Billy Stubbs se konyn ... wel, Tom het gesê hy't dit nie gedoen nie en ek kan nie sien hoe hy kon nie, maar nogtans, die konyn kon hom mos nie self aan die dakbalke opgehang het nie, kon hy?"

"Nee, ek dink nie so nie," sê Dumbledore stil.

"Maar slaan my dood, ek weet nie hoe hy daar bo gekom het om dit te doen nie. Al wat ek weet, is hy en Billy het die vorige dag stry gekry en toe –" Mevrou Cole drink nog 'n sluk jenewer en mors hierdie keer 'n bietjie op haar ken, "met die someruitstappie – ons neem hulle uit, weet u, een keer 'n jaar, platteland of see toe – wel, Amy Benson en Dennis Bishop het daarna nooit eintlik weer reggekom nie, en al wat ons uit hulle kon kry, was dat hulle saam met Tom Riddle by 'n grot in is. Hy't gesweer hulle het dit net gaan verken, maar iets moes daarbinne gebeur het, ek is seker daarvan. En, wel, daar was al baie ander dinge, snaakse dinge ..."

Sy kyk weer na Dumbledore en al is haar wange blosend, is haar blik ferm.

“Ek dink nie baie mense sal jammer wees as hy weggaan nie.”

“Ek hoop u verstaan dat ons hom nie permanent daar sal hou nie?” vra Dumbledore. “Hy sal hierheen moet terugkom, ten minste elke somer.”

“O wel, dis beter as ’n hou op die neus met ’n geroeste vuuryster,” sê mevrou Cole en hik effens. Sy kom op die been en Harry is beïndruk om te sien sy is stewig op haar voete, al is twee derdes van die jenewer nou op. “Ek veronderstel u wil hom graag sien?”

“Baie graag,” sê Dumbledore en staan ook op.

Sy lei hom by haar kantoor uit en met die kliptrap op terwyl sy in die verbyloop aanhoudend instruksies en vermanings vir die helpers en kinders uitroep. Harry sien die kinders dra almal dieselfde soort gryserige uniforms. Hulle lyk redelik goed versorg, maar dit is ongetwyfeld ’n onvriendelike plek om in groot te word.

“Hier is ons,” sê mevrou Cole toe hulle by die tweede trapportaal indraai en buite die eerste deur in ’n lang gang gaan staan. Sy klop twee keer en gaan in.

“Tom? Jy het ’n besoeker. Dit is meneer Dumberton – ekskuus, Dunderbore. Hy het vir jou kom vertel jy – Wag, ek sal dat hy dit doen.”

Harry en die twee Dumbledores stap by die kamer in en mevrou Cole maak die deur agter hulle toe. Dit is ’n klein, leë vertrek met niks in behalwe ’n ou hangkas en ’n ysterbed nie. ’n Seun sit op die grys komberse; sy bene is voor hom uitgestrek en hy hou ’n boek vas.

Daar is geen teken van die Gaunts in Tom Riddle se gesig nie. Merope se laaste wens is vervul; hy is ’n miniatuurweergawe van sy aantreklike pa: lank vir elf jaar oud, donker hare en bleek. Sy oë vernou effens terwyl hy Dumbledore se eksentrieke voorkoms inneem. Daar is ’n oomblik stilte.

“Aangename kennis, Tom,” sê Dumbledore. Hy loop vorentoe en hou sy hand uit.

Die seun huiwer, neem dit dan, en hulle skud hand. Dumbledore trek ’n harde houtstoel nader en kom sit langs Riddle sodat hulle twee baie soos ’n hospitaalpasiënt en sy besoeker lyk.

“Ek is professor Dumbledore.”

“Professor?” herhaal Riddle. Hy lyk lugtig. “Soos in ‘dokter’? Hoekom is jy hier? Het sy jou laat kom om my te ondersoek?”

Hy wys na die deur waar mevrou Cole so pas uitgegaan uit.

“Nee, nee,” sê Dumbledore en glimlag.

“Ek glo jou nie,” sê Riddle. “Sy wil my laat ondersoek, nè? Praat die waarheid!”

Hy sê die laaste drie woorde met ’n galmende krag wat amper skokkend is. Dit is ’n bevel, en dit klink of hy dit al baie keer van tevore gegee het. Sy oë is wyd gerek en hy gluur na Dumbledore, wat hom nie antwoord nie en net vriendelik aanhou glimlag. Ná ’n paar sekondes hou Riddle op gluur, hoewel hy nou selfs nóg lugtiger lyk.

“Wie is jy?”

“Ek het jou gesê. My naam is professor Dumbledore. Ek werk by ’n skool genaamd Hogwarts en ek het jou ’n plek in my skool kom aanbied – as jy wil, kan dit jou nuwe skool word.”

Riddle se reaksie hierop is verstommend. Hy spring van die bed af op en steier woedend weg van Dumbledore af.

“Jy kan nie vir my lieg nie! Jy kom van die malhuis af! ‘Professor’, ja, natuurlik – Wel, ek gaan nie, hoor jy my? Daai ou vrou is die een wat in die malhuis hoort. Ek het nooit iets aan Amy Benson en Dennis Bishop gedoen nie. Gaan vra hulle self; hulle sal vir jou sê!”

“Ek is nie van die malhuis nie,” sê Dumbledore geduldig. “Ek is ’n onderwyser en as jy nou bedaar en kom sit, sal ek jou van Hogwarts vertel. Maar as jy nie na die skool toe wil kom nie, sal niemand jou natuurlik dwing nie –”

“Laat hulle net probeer!” gryns Riddle.

“Hogwarts,” gaan Dumbledore aan asof hy Riddle se laaste woorde nie gehoor het nie, “is ’n skool vir mense met spesiale vermoëns –”

“Ek is nie mal nie!”

“Ek weet jy’s nie mal nie. Hogwarts is nie ’n skool vir mal mense nie. Dit is ’n skool vir toorkuns.”

Dit is doodstil. Riddle verstar; sy gesig is uitdrukkingloos, maar sy oë flikker heen en weer tussen Dumbledore se twee, asof hy een van hulle probeer uitvang dat hy lieg.

“Toorkuns?” herhaal hy in ’n fluisterstem.

“Dis reg,” sê Dumbledore.

“Is dit wat ek kan doen ... toor?”

“Wat kan jy doen?”

“Allerhande dinge,” sê Riddle sag. ’n Gloed van opwinding stoot in sy nek en sy hol wange op; hy lyk koorsig. “Ek kan dinge laat beweeg sonder om aan hulle te vat. Ek kan diere laat doen wat ek wil hê hulle moet doen sonder om hulle eers te leer. Ek kan slegte dinge laat gebeur met mense van wie ek nie hou nie. Ek kan hulle seermaak as ek wil.”

Sy bene bewe. Hy strompel vorentoe en kom sit weer op die bed terwyl hy na sy hande staar en sy kop vooroor buig asof hy bid.

“Ek het geweet ek is anders,” fluister hy vir sy bewende vingers. “Ek het geweet ek is spesiaal. Ek het altyd geweet daar is iets.”

“Wel, jy was heeltemal reg,” sê Dumbledore, wat nou nie meer glimlag nie, maar Riddle stip dophou. “Jy is ’n towenaar.”

Riddle tel sy kop op. Sy gesig het heeltemal verander; dit lyk wild van blydschap en om die een of ander rede laat dit hom nie beter lyk nie; intendeel, sy fynbesnede gelaatstrekke lyk skielik ruwer en sy uitdrukking amper dierlik.

“Is jy ook ’n towenaar?”

“Ja, ek is.”

“Bewys dit,” sê Riddle dadelik in dieselfde bevelende stemtoom wat hy gebruik het toe hy “Praat die waarheid” gesê het.

Dumbledore lig sy wenkbroue.

“As jy Hogwarts toe wil kom –”

“Natuurlik wil ek!”

“Dan sal jy my as ‘professor’ of ‘meneer’ moet aanspreek.”

Riddle se uitdrukking verhard vir ’n baie vlugtige oomblik voor hy in ’n onherkenbaar beleefde stem sê: “Ek is jammer, meneer. Ek bedoel – asseblief, professor, kan u vir my wys – ?”

Harry is seker Dumbledore gaan weier, dat hy vir Riddle gaan sê daar sal by Hogwarts baie tyd vir praktiese demonstrasies wees, dat hulle hier in ’n gebou vol Moggels is en daarom versigtig moet wees. Maar tot sy groot verbasing haal Dumbledore sy towerstaf uit sy baadjie se binnesak, wys daarmee na die armoedige hangkas in die hoek en swaai die towerstaf dan ongeërg. Die hangkas slaan in vlamme uit.

Riddle spring op. Harry kan hom nie kwalik neem dat hy van skok en woede gil nie; al sy wêreldse besittings moet seker daarin wees, maar net toe Riddle Dumbledore wil bevlieg, verdwyn die vlamme en die hangkas is weer heeltemal ongedeerd.

Riddle staar van die hangkas na Dumbledore en wys dan met ’n gulsige uitdrukking na die towerstaf.

“Waar kan ek so een kry?”

“Elke ding op sy tyd,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek dink daar is iets wat uit jou hangkas probeer kom.”

En sowaar, daar is ’n dowwe gerammel van binne af. Vir die eerste keer lyk Riddle bang.

“Maak die deur oop,” sê Dumbledore.

Riddle huiwer, loop dan na die hangkas en pluk die deur oop. Op die boonste rak, bo ’n reling waaraan verslete klere hang, is daar

'n klein kartonboksie wat rammel en ratel asof daar 'n hele paar paniekerige muise in vasgekeer is.

"Haal dit uit," sê Dumbledore.

Riddle haal die rammelende boks uit. Hy lyk senuagtig.

"Is daar enigiets in die boks wat jy nie veronderstel is om te hê nie?" vra Dumbledore.

Riddle gee Dumbledore 'n lang, reguit, berekende kyk.

"Ja, ek veronderstel so, professor," sê hy uiteindelik in 'n uitdrukkinglose stem.

"Maak dit oop," sê Dumbledore.

Riddle haal die deksel af en keer die inhoud op sy bed uit sonder om daarna te kyk. Harry het iets baie meer opwindends verwag, maar hy sien net 'n klomp klein, alledaagse voorwerpe: onder meer 'n klimtol, 'n silwer vingerhoedjie en 'n aangeslaande mondfluitjie. Toe die goed uit die boks is, hou hulle dadelik op ratel en lê doodstil op die dun komberse.

"Jy gaan dit met jou apologie aan die eienaars teruggee," sê Dumbledore kalm terwyl hy sy towerstaf terugsit in sy baadjiesak. "Ek sal weet of jy dit gedoen het. En wees gewaarsku: Diefstal word nie by Hogwarts geduld nie."

Riddle lyk glad nie skaam nie; hy staar Dumbledore nog steeds kil en ondersoekend aan. Uiteindelik sê hy in 'n kleurlose stem: "Ja, professor."

"By Hogwarts," gaan Dumbledore aan, "leer ons nie net vir jou hoe om te toor nie. Ons leer jou ook hoe om jou toorkrag te beheer. Jy het – onbedoeld, glo ek – jou kragte gebruik op 'n manier wat nie by ons skool onderrig of geduld word nie. Jy is nie die eerste een, en jy sal ook nie die laaste een wees, wat toelaat dat jou towerkrag met jou op loop sit nie. Maar jy moet weet, Hogwarts kan studente skors, en die Ministerie van Towerkuns – ja, daar is 'n Ministerie – sal wetsoortreders nog swaarder straf. Alle nuwe towenaars moet onderneem om ons wette te gehoorsaam wanneer hulle ons wêreld betree."

"Ja, professor," sê Riddle weer.

Dit is onmoontlik om te sê wat hy dink; sy gesig bly totaal uitdrukkingloos terwyl hy die gesteelde voorwerpe terugsit in die kartonboks. Toe hy klaar is, draai hy na Dumbledore en sê prontuit: "Ek het niks geld nie."

"Dit kan maklik reggestel word," sê Dumbledore en haal 'n geldsakkie van leer uit sy sak. "Hogwarts het 'n fonds vir studente wat hulp nodig het om boeke en togas te koop. Jy sal dalk party van jou towerspreukboeke en so meer tweedehands moet koop, maar –"

“Waar koop jy towerspreukboeke?” val Riddle hom in die rede. Hy vat die swaar geldsakkie sonder om vir Dumbledore dankie te sê en bekyk nou ’n vet goue Galjoen.

“In Diagonaalstraat,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek het ons lys boeke en skooltoerusting by my. Ek kan jou help om alles te kry –”

“Kom u saam met my?” vra Riddle en kyk op.

“Natuurlik, as jy –”

“Ek het niemand nodig nie,” sê Riddle. “Ek is daaraan gewoond om dinge vir myself te doen; ek loop heeltyd op my eie in Londen rond. Hoe kom ’n mens by Diagonaalstraat – professor?” voeg hy by as hy Dumbledore se oog vang.

Harry dink Dumbledore sal daarop aandring om saam met Riddle te gaan, maar hy word weer eens verras. Dumbledore gee vir Riddle die koevert met sy lys toerusting in, en nadat hy Riddle vertel het presies hoe om van die weeshuis af by die Stomende Pot te kom, sê hy: “Jy sal dit kan sien, al kan die Moggels om jou – dis nou niemagiëse mense – nie. Vra vir Tom die kroegman – maklik om te onthou, want julle het dieselfde naam –”

Riddle kry ’n geïrriteerde senutrek soos iemand wat ’n lastige vlieg wil wegjaag.

“Hou jy nie van die naam ‘Tom’ nie?”

“Daar is baie Toms,” mompel Riddle. En dan, asof hy die vraag nie kan onderdruk nie, asof dit ten spyte van homself uitglip, vra hy: “Was my pa ’n towenaar? Hulle sê vir my sy naam was ook Tom Riddle.”

“Ek is bevrees ek weet nie,” sê Dumbledore in ’n sagte stem.

“My ma kon nie toorkrag gehad het nie, want dan sou sy nie nou dood gewees het nie,” sê Riddle meer vir homself as vir Dumbledore. “Dit moet hy gewees het. So – as ek al my goed het – wanneer kan ek na daai Hogwarts toe gaan?”

“Al die besonderhede is op die tweede stukkie perkament in jou koevert,” sê Dumbledore. “Jy vertrek op die eerste September vanaf King’s Cross-stasie. Daar is ’n treinkaartjie ook in.”

Riddle knik. Dumbledore staan op en hou weer sy hand uit. Riddle neem dit en sê: “Ek kan met slange praat. Ek het dit op ons uitstappies platteland toe uitgevind – hulle kom na my toe en fluister vir my. Is dit normaal vir ’n towenaar?”

Harry weet hy het opsetlik tot nou toe niks van sy sterkste toorkrag gesê, want hy is vasberade om Dumbledore te beïndruk.

“Dit is ongewoon,” sê Dumbledore ná ’n oomblik se huiwering, “maar nie ongeken nie.”

Sy stemtoon is ongeërg, maar sy oë beweeg nuuskierig oor Riddle se gesig. Hulle staan vir ’n oomblik so, man en seun, en staar

mekaar na. Dan los hulle mekaar se hande en Dumbledore stap deur toe.

“Goed gaan, Tom. Sien jou by Hogwarts.”

“Ek dink dis genoeg,” sê die grys Dumbledore langs Harry en sekondes later vlieg hulle weer gewigloos deur die donker en beland terug in die hedendaagse kantoor.

“Sit gerus,” sê Dumbledore toe hy langs Harry grondvat.

Harry gehoorsaam; alles wat hy so pas gesien het, maal nog deur sy kop.

“Hy het dit baie vinniger geglo as wat ek het – ek bedoel, toe professor vir hom sê hy’s ’n towenaar,” sê Harry. “Toe Hagrid dit vir my sê, het ek hom eers nie geglo nie.”

“Ja, Riddle was absoluut gereed om te glo hy is – om sy woord te gebruik – ‘spesiaal,’” sê Dumbledore.

“Het professor geweet – destyds?” vra Harry.

“Het ek geweet ek het so pas die gevaarlikste Donker towenaar van alle tye ontmoet?” sê Dumbledore. “Nee, ek het geen benul gehad dat hy sou ontwikkel tot wat hy vandag is nie. Ek het hom egter beslis boeiend gevind. Ek het na Hogwarts teruggekeer en my voorgeneem om ’n ogie oor hom te hou, iets wat ek in elk geval moes doen aangesien hy alleen en sonder vriende was, hoewel ek destyds gevoel het ek moet dit net soveel vir ander as om sy ontwil doen.

“Soos jy gehoor het, was sy kragte verbasend goed ontwikkel vir so ’n jong towenaar en – die interessantste en onheilspellendste van alles – hy het alreeds ontdek hy het ’n mate van beheer daaroor en dit bewus begin gebruik. En soos jy gesien het, was dit nie die lukrake eksperimente wat tipies van jong towenaars is nie; hy het alreeds toorkrag teen ander mense gebruik om hulle bang te maak, te straf en te beheer. Die stories van die verwurgde konyn en die jong seun en meisie wat hy by die grot ingelok het, was veel-seggend ... *Ek kan hulle seermaak as ek wil ...*”

“En hy was ’n Parselmond,” val Harry hom in die rede.

“Ja, inderdaad; ’n seldsame vermoë en een wat veronderstel is om met die Donker Kunste te skakel, hoewel ons weet daar is onder die grootses en die goeies ook Parselmonde. Sy vermoë om met slange te praat, het my nie naastenby so onrustig gemaak soos sy duidelike instink vir wreedheid, geheimhouding en oorheersing nie.

“Die tyd het ons al weer ingehaal,” sê Dumbledore en wys na die donker lug agter die vensters. “Maar voor ons uitmekaar gaan, wil ek jou aandag vestig op sekere aspekte van die toneel wat ons so pas gadegeslaan het, want dit hou direk verband met wat ons tydens verdere ontmoetings sal bespreek.

“Eerstens hoop ek jy het gesien hoe reageer Riddle toe ek noem dat iemand anders sy voornaam, ‘Tom’, met hom deel?”

Harry knik.

“Daar het hy gewys hy verafsku enigiets wat hom met ander mense verbind, enigiets wat hom gewoon maak. Hy wou selfs toe al anders wees, verwyderd van ander en berug. Soos jy weet, het hy sy naam binne ’n paar jaar ná daardie gesprek verwerp en die masker van ‘die Heer Voldemort’ geskep waaragter hy nou al so lank skuil.

“Ek vertrou jy het ook opgemerk dat Tom Riddle alreeds uiters onafhanklik, geheimsinnig en blykbaar sonder vriende was. Hy wou nie hulp of geselskap vir sy uitstappie Diagonaalstraat toe hê nie. Hy het verkies om alles alleen te doen. Die volwasse Voldemort is dieselfde. Jy sal baie van sy Doodseters hoor sê hulle is sy vertrouelinge en net hulle is naby hom en verstaan hom. Hulle verkeer onder ’n wanindruk. Die Heer Voldemort het nog nooit ’n vriend gehad nie, en ek twyfel of hy nog ooit een wou hê.

“Laastens – ek hoop nie jy is te vaak om hieraan aandag te skenk nie, Harry – die jong Tom Riddle het daarvan gehou om trofeeë bymekaar te maak. Jy het die boks gesteelde items wat hy in sy kamer weggesteek het, gesien. Hy het dit alles by slagoffers van sy boeligedrag afgevat; ’n mens kan dit sy soeweniers van besonder onaangename towerkunsies noem. Hou hierdie neiging om op te gaar in gedagte, want dit sal later spesifiek belangrik word.

“En nou is dit regtig tyd om bed toe te gaan.”

Harry kom op die been. Terwyl hy deur die vertrek loop, val sy oë op die tafeltjie waarop Marvolo Gaunt se ring verlede keer gelê het, maar die ring is nie meer daar nie.

“Ja, Harry?” sê Dumbledore toe Harry gaan staan.

“Die ring is weg,” sê Harry en kyk rond. “Maar ek het gedink professor het dalk die mondfluitjie of iets.”

Dumbledore glimlag breed en loer vir hom oor sy halfmaanbril.

“Baie skerpsinnig, Harry, maar die mondfluitjie was maar altyd net ’n mondfluitjie.”

En op daardie geheimsinnige noot waai hy vir Harry, wat verstaan dat hy nou moet gaan.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



FELIX FELICIS

Harry had Herbology first thing the following morning. He had been unable to tell Ron and Hermione about his lesson with Dumbledore over breakfast for fear of being overheard, but he filled them in as they walked across the vegetable patch toward the greenhouses. The weekend's brutal wind had died out at last; the weird mist had returned and it took them a little longer than usual to find the correct greenhouse.

"Wow, scary thought, the boy You-Know-Who," said Ron quietly, as they took their places around one of the gnarled Snargaluff stumps that formed this term's project, and began pulling on their protective gloves. "But I still don't get why Dumbledore's showing you all this. I mean, it's really interesting and everything, but what's the point?"

"Dunno," said Harry, inserting a gum shield. "But he says it's all important and it'll help me survive."

“I think it’s fascinating,” said Hermione earnestly. “It makes absolute sense to know as much about Voldemort as possible. How else will you find out his weaknesses?”

“So how was Slughorn’s latest party?” Harry asked her thickly through the gum shield.

“Oh, it was quite fun, really,” said Hermione, now putting on protective goggles. “I mean, he drones on about famous ex-pupils a bit, and he absolutely *fawns* on McLaggen because he’s so well-connected, but he gave us some really nice food and he introduced us to Gwenog Jones.”

“Gwenog Jones?” said Ron, his eyes widening under his own goggles. “*The* Gwenog Jones? Captain of the Holyhead Harpies?”

“That’s right,” said Hermione. “Personally, I thought she was a bit full of herself, but —”

“*Quite* enough chat over here!” said Professor Sprout briskly, bustling over and looking stern. “You’re lagging behind, everybody else has started, and Neville’s already got his first pod!”

They looked around; sure enough, there sat Neville with a bloody lip and several nasty scratches along the side of his face, but clutching an unpleasantly pulsating green object about the size of a grapefruit.

“Okay, Professor, we’re starting now!” said Ron, adding quietly, when she had turned away again, “should’ve used Muffliato, Harry.”

“No, we shouldn’t!” said Hermione at once, looking, as she always did, intensely cross at the thought of the Half-Blood Prince and his spells. “Well, come on . . . we’d better get going. . . .”

She gave the other two an apprehensive look; they all took deep

breaths and then dived at the gnarled stump between them.

It sprang to life at once; long, prickly, bramblelike vines flew out of the top and whipped through the air. One tangled itself in Hermione's hair, and Ron beat it back with a pair of secateurs; Harry succeeded in trapping a couple of vines and knotting them together; a hole opened in the middle of all the tentaclelike branches; Hermione plunged her arm bravely into this hole, which closed like a trap around her elbow; Harry and Ron tugged and wrenched at the vines, forcing the hole to open again, and Hermione snatched her arm free, clutching in her fingers a pod just like Neville's. At once, the prickly vines shot back inside, and the gnarled stump sat there looking like an innocently dead lump of wood.

"You know, I don't think I'll be having any of these in my garden when I've got my own place," said Ron, pushing his goggles up onto his forehead and wiping sweat from his face.

"Pass me a bowl," said Hermione, holding the pulsating pod at arm's length; Harry handed one over and she dropped the pod into it with a look of disgust on her face.

"Don't be squeamish, squeeze it out, they're best when they're fresh!" called Professor Sprout.

"Anyway," said Hermione, continuing their interrupted conversation as though a lump of wood had not just attacked them, "Slughorn's going to have a Christmas party, Harry, and there's no way you'll be able to wriggle out of this one because he actually asked me to check your free evenings, so he could be sure to have it on a night you can come."

Harry groaned. Meanwhile, Ron, who was attempting to burst the

pod in the bowl by putting both hands on it, standing up, and squashing it as hard as he could, said angrily, “And this is another party just for Slughorn’s favorites, is it?”

“Just for the Slug Club, yes,” said Hermione.

The pod flew out from under Ron’s fingers and hit the greenhouse glass, rebounding onto the back of Professor Sprout’s head and knocking off her old, patched hat. Harry went to retrieve the pod; when he got back, Hermione was saying, “Look, *I* didn’t make up the name ‘Slug Club’ —”

“‘*Slug Club*, ’” repeated Ron with a sneer worthy of Malfoy. “It’s pathetic. Well, I hope you enjoy your party. Why don’t you try hooking up with McLaggen, then Slughorn can make you King and Queen Slug —”

“We’re allowed to bring guests,” said Hermione, who for some reason had turned a bright, boiling scarlet, “and I was *going* to ask you to come, but if you think it’s that stupid then I won’t bother!”

Harry suddenly wished the pod had flown a little farther, so that he need not have been sitting here with the pair of them. Unnoticed by either, he seized the bowl that contained the pod and began to try and open it by the noisiest and most energetic means he could think of; unfortunately, he could still hear every word of their conversation.

“You were going to ask me?” asked Ron, in a completely different voice.

“Yes,” said Hermione angrily. “But obviously if you’d rather I *hooked up with McLaggen . . .*”

There was a pause while Harry continued to pound the resilient pod with a trowel.

“No, I wouldn’t,” said Ron, in a very quiet voice.

Harry missed the pod, hit the bowl, and shattered it.

“*Reparo*,” he said hastily, poking the pieces with his wand, and the bowl sprang back together again. The crash, however, appeared to have awoken Ron and Hermione to Harry’s presence. Hermione looked flustered and immediately started fussing about for her copy of *Flesh-Eating Trees of the World* to find out the correct way to juice Snargaluff pods; Ron, on the other hand, looked sheepish but also rather pleased with himself.

“Hand that over, Harry,” said Hermione hurriedly. “It says we’re supposed to puncture them with something sharp. . . .”

Harry passed her the pod in the bowl; he and Ron both snapped their goggles back over their eyes and dived, once more, for the stump.

It was not as though he was really surprised, thought Harry, as he wrestled with a thorny vine intent upon throttling him; he had had an inkling that this might happen sooner or later. But he was not sure how he felt about it. . . . He and Cho were now too embarrassed to look at each other, let alone talk to each other; what if Ron and Hermione started going out together, then split up? Could their friendship survive it? Harry remembered the few weeks when they had not been talking to each other in the third year; he had not enjoyed trying to bridge the distance between them. And then, what if they didn’t split up? What if they became like Bill and Fleur, and it became excruciatingly embarrassing to be in their presence, so that he was shut out for good?

“Gotcha!” yelled Ron, pulling a second pod from the stump just as

Hermione managed to burst the first one open, so that the bowl was full of tubers wriggling like pale green worms.

The rest of the lesson passed without further mention of Slughorn's party. Although Harry watched his two friends more closely over the next few days, Ron and Hermione did not seem any different except that they were a little politer to each other than usual. Harry supposed he would just have to wait to see what happened under the influence of butterbeer in Slughorn's dimly lit room on the night of the party. In the meantime, however, he had more pressing worries.

Katie Bell was still in St. Mungo's Hospital with no prospect of leaving, which meant that the promising Gryffindor team Harry had been training so carefully since September was one Chaser short. He kept putting off replacing Katie in the hope that she would return, but their opening match against Slytherin was looming, and he finally had to accept that she would not be back in time to play.

Harry did not think he could stand another full-House tryout. With a sinking feeling that had little to do with Quidditch, he cornered Dean Thomas after Transfiguration one day. Most of the class had already left, although several twittering yellow birds were still zooming around the room, all of Hermione's creation; nobody else had succeeded in conjuring so much as a feather from thin air.

"Are you still interested in playing Chaser?"

"Wha — ? Yeah, of course!" said Dean excitedly. Over Dean's shoulder, Harry saw Seamus Finnigan slamming his books into his bag, looking sour. One of the reasons why Harry would have preferred not to have to ask Dean to play was that he knew Seamus would not like it. On the other hand, he had to do what was best for

the team, and Dean had outflown Seamus at the tryouts.

“Well then, you’re in,” said Harry. “There’s a practice tonight, seven o’clock.”

“Right,” said Dean. “Cheers, Harry! Blimey, I can’t wait to tell Ginny!”

He sprinted out of the room, leaving Harry and Seamus alone together, an uncomfortable moment made no easier when a bird dropping landed on Seamus’s head as one of Hermione’s canaries whizzed over them.

Seamus was not the only person disgruntled by the choice of Katie’s substitute. There was much muttering in the common room about the fact that Harry had now chosen two of his classmates for the team. As Harry had endured much worse mutterings than this in his school career, he was not particularly bothered, but all the same, the pressure was increasing to provide a win in the upcoming match against Slytherin. If Gryffindor won, Harry knew that the whole House would forget that they had criticized him and swear that they had always known it was a great team. If they lost . . . well, Harry thought wryly, he had still endured worse mutterings. . . .

Harry had no reason to regret his choice once he saw Dean fly that evening; he worked well with Ginny and Demelza. The Beaters, Peakes and Coote, were getting better all the time. The only problem was Ron.

Harry had known all along that Ron was an inconsistent player who suffered from nerves and a lack of confidence, and unfortunately, the looming prospect of the opening game of the season seemed to have brought out all his old insecurities. After letting in half a dozen

goals, most of them scored by Ginny, his technique became wilder and wilder, until he finally punched an oncoming Demelza Robins in the mouth.

“It was an accident, I’m sorry, Demelza, really sorry!” Ron shouted after her as she zigzagged back to the ground, dripping blood everywhere. “I just —”

“Panicked,” Ginny said angrily, landing next to Demelza and examining her fat lip. “You prat, Ron, look at the state of her!”

“I can fix that,” said Harry, landing beside the two girls, pointing his wand at Demelza’s mouth, and saying “*Episkey*.” “And Ginny, don’t call Ron a prat, you’re not the Captain of this team —”

“Well, you seemed too busy to call him a prat and I thought someone should —”

Harry forced himself not to laugh.

“In the air, everyone, let’s go. . . .”

Overall it was one of the worst practices they had had all term, though Harry did not feel that honesty was the best policy when they were this close to the match.

“Good work, everyone, I think we’ll flatten Slytherin,” he said bracingly, and the Chasers and Beaters left the changing room looking reasonably happy with themselves.

“I played like a sack of dragon dung,” said Ron in a hollow voice when the door had swung shut behind Ginny.

“No, you didn’t,” said Harry firmly. “You’re the best Keeper I tried out, Ron. Your only problem is nerves.”

He kept up a relentless flow of encouragement all the way back to the castle, and by the time they reached the second floor, Ron was

looking marginally more cheerful. When Harry pushed open the tapestry to take their usual shortcut up to Gryffindor Tower, however, they found themselves looking at Dean and Ginny, who were locked in a close embrace and kissing fiercely as though glued together.

It was as though something large and scaly erupted into life in Harry's stomach, clawing at his insides: Hot blood seemed to flood his brain, so that all thought was extinguished, replaced by a savage urge to jinx Dean into a jelly. Wrestling with this sudden madness, he heard Ron's voice as though from a great distance away.

"Oi!"

Dean and Ginny broke apart and looked around.

"What?" said Ginny.

"I don't want to find my own sister snogging people in public!"

"This was a deserted corridor till you came butting in!" said Ginny.

Dean was looking embarrassed. He gave Harry a shifty grin that Harry did not return, as the newborn monster inside him was roaring for Dean's instant dismissal from the team.

"Er . . . c'mon, Ginny," said Dean, "let's go back to the common room. . . ."

"You go!" said Ginny. "I want a word with my dear brother!"

Dean left, looking as though he was not sorry to depart the scene.

"Right," said Ginny, tossing her long red hair out of her face and glaring at Ron, "let's get this straight once and for all. It is none of your business who I go out with or what I do with them, Ron —"

"Yeah, it is!" said Ron, just as angrily. "D'you think I want people saying my sister's a —"

“A what?” shouted Ginny, drawing her wand. “A *what*, exactly?”

“He doesn’t mean anything, Ginny —” said Harry automatically, though the monster was roaring its approval of Ron’s words.

“Oh yes he does!” she said, flaring up at Harry. “Just because *he’s* never snogged anyone in his life, just because the best kiss *he’s* ever had is from our Auntie Muriel —”

“Shut your mouth!” bellowed Ron, bypassing red and turning maroon.

“No, I will not!” yelled Ginny, beside herself. “I’ve seen you with Phlegm, hoping she’ll kiss you on the cheek every time you see her, it’s pathetic! If you went out and got a bit of snogging done yourself, you wouldn’t mind so much that everyone else does it!”

Ron had pulled out his wand too; Harry stepped swiftly between them.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Ron roared, trying to get a clear shot at Ginny around Harry, who was now standing in front of her with his arms outstretched. “Just because I don’t do it in public — !”

Ginny screamed with derisive laughter, trying to push Harry out of the way.

“Been kissing Pigwidgeon, have you? Or have you got a picture of Auntie Muriel stashed under your pillow?”

“You —”

A streak of orange light flew under Harry’s left arm and missed Ginny by inches; Harry pushed Ron up against the wall.

“Don’t be stupid —”

“Harry’s snogged Cho Chang!” shouted Ginny, who sounded close

to tears now. “And Hermione snogged Viktor Krum, it’s only you who acts like it’s something disgusting, Ron, and that’s because you’ve got about as much experience as a twelve-year-old!”

And with that, she stormed away. Harry quickly let go of Ron; the look on his face was murderous. They both stood there, breathing heavily, until Mrs. Norris, Filch’s cat, appeared around the corner, which broke the tension.

“C’mon,” said Harry, as the sound of Filch’s shuffling feet reached their ears.

They hurried up the stairs and along a seventh-floor corridor. “Oi, out of the way!” Ron barked at a small girl who jumped in fright and dropped a bottle of toadspawn.

Harry hardly noticed the sound of shattering glass; he felt disoriented, dizzy; being struck by a lightning bolt must be something like this. *It’s just because she’s Ron’s sister*, he told himself. *You just didn’t like seeing her kissing Dean because she’s Ron’s sister. . . .*

But unbidden into his mind came an image of that same deserted corridor with himself kissing Ginny instead. . . . The monster in his chest purred . . . but then he saw Ron ripping open the tapestry curtain and drawing his wand on Harry, shouting things like “betrayal of trust” . . . “supposed to be my friend” . . .

“D’you think Hermione did snog Krum?” Ron asked abruptly, as they approached the Fat Lady. Harry gave a guilty start and wrenched his imagination away from a corridor in which no Ron intruded, in which he and Ginny were quite alone —

“What?” he said confusedly. “Oh . . . er . . .”

The honest answer was “yes,” but he did not want to give it.

However, Ron seemed to gather the worst from the look on Harry's face.

"Dilligrout," he said darkly to the Fat Lady, and they climbed through the portrait hole into the common room.

Neither of them mentioned Ginny or Hermione again; indeed, they barely spoke to each other that evening and got into bed in silence, each absorbed in his own thoughts.

Harry lay awake for a long time, looking up at the canopy of his four-poster and trying to convince himself that his feelings for Ginny were entirely elder-brotherly. They had lived, had they not, like brother and sister all summer, playing Quidditch, teasing Ron, and having a laugh about Bill and Phlegm? He had known Ginny for years now. . . . It was natural that he should feel protective . . . natural that he should want to look out for her . . . want to rip Dean limb from limb for kissing her . . . No . . . he would have to control that particular brotherly feeling. . . .

Ron gave a great grunting snore.

She's Ron's sister, Harry told himself firmly. *Ron's sister. She's out-of-bounds*. He would not risk his friendship with Ron for anything. He punched his pillow into a more comfortable shape and waited for sleep to come, trying his utmost not to allow his thoughts to stray anywhere near Ginny.

Harry awoke next morning feeling slightly dazed and confused by a series of dreams in which Ron had chased him with a Beater's bat, but by midday he would have happily exchanged the dream Ron for the real one, who was not only cold-shouldering Ginny and Dean, but also treating a hurt and bewildered Hermione with an icy, sneering

indifference. What was more, Ron seemed to have become, overnight, as touchy and ready to lash out as the average Blast-Ended Skrewt. Harry spent the day attempting to keep the peace between Ron and Hermione with no success; finally, Hermione departed for bed in high dudgeon, and Ron stalked off to the boys' dormitory after swearing angrily at several frightened first years for looking at him.

To Harry's dismay, Ron's new aggression did not wear off over the next few days. Worse still, it coincided with an even deeper dip in his Keeping skills, which made him still more aggressive, so that during the final Quidditch practice before Saturday's match, he failed to save every single goal the Chasers aimed at him, but bellowed at everybody so much that he reduced Demelza Robins to tears.

"You shut up and leave her alone!" shouted Peakes, who was about two-thirds Ron's height, though admittedly carrying a heavy bat.

"ENOUGH!" bellowed Harry, who had seen Ginny glowering in Ron's direction and, remembering her reputation as an accomplished caster of the Bat-Bogey Hex, soared over to intervene before things got out of hand. "Peakes, go and pack up the Bludgers. Demelza, pull yourself together, you played really well today. Ron . . ." he waited until the rest of the team were out of earshot before saying it, "you're my best mate, but carry on treating the rest of them like this and I'm going to kick you off the team."

He really thought for a moment that Ron might hit him, but then something much worse happened: Ron seemed to sag on his broom; all the fight went out of him and he said, "I resign. I'm pathetic."

"You're not pathetic and you're not resigning!" said Harry fiercely, seizing Ron by the front of his robes. "You can save anything when

you're on form, it's a mental problem you've got!"

"You calling me mental?"

"Yeah, maybe I am!"

They glared at each other for a moment, then Ron shook his head wearily. "I know you haven't got any time to find another Keeper, so I'll play tomorrow, but if we lose, and we will, I'm taking myself off the team."

Nothing Harry said made any difference. He tried boosting Ron's confidence all through dinner, but Ron was too busy being grumpy and surly with Hermione to notice. Harry persisted in the common room that evening, but his assertion that the whole team would be devastated if Ron left was somewhat undermined by the fact that the rest of the team was sitting in a huddle in a distant corner, clearly muttering about Ron and casting him nasty looks. Finally Harry tried getting angry again in the hope of provoking Ron into a defiant, and hopefully goal-saving, attitude, but this strategy did not appear to work any better than encouragement; Ron went to bed as dejected and hopeless as ever.

Harry lay awake for a very long time in the darkness. He did not want to lose the upcoming match; not only was it his first as Captain, but he was determined to beat Draco Malfoy at Quidditch even if he could not yet prove his suspicions about him. Yet if Ron played as he had done in the last few practices, their chances of winning were very slim . . .

If only there was something he could do to make Ron pull himself together . . . make him play at the top of his form . . . something that would ensure that Ron had a really good day. . . .

And the answer came to Harry in one, sudden, glorious stroke of inspiration.

Breakfast was the usual excitable affair next morning; the Slytherins hissed and booed loudly as every member of the Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall. Harry glanced at the ceiling and saw a clear, pale blue sky: a good omen.

The Gryffindor table, a solid mass of red and gold, cheered as Harry and Ron approached. Harry grinned and waved; Ron grimaced weakly and shook his head.

“Cheer up, Ron!” called Lavender. “I know you’ll be brilliant!”

Ron ignored her.

“Tea?” Harry asked him. “Coffee? Pumpkin juice?”

“Anything,” said Ron glumly, taking a moody bite of toast.

A few minutes later Hermione, who had become so tired of Ron’s recent unpleasant behavior that she had not come down to breakfast with them, paused on her way up the table.

“How are you both feeling?” she asked tentatively, her eyes on the back of Ron’s head.

“Fine,” said Harry, who was concentrating on handing Ron a glass of pumpkin juice. “There you go, Ron. Drink up.”

Ron had just raised the glass to his lips when Hermione spoke sharply.

“Don’t drink that, Ron!”

Both Harry and Ron looked up at her.

“Why not?” said Ron.

Hermione was now staring at Harry as though she could not

believe her eyes.

“You just put something in that drink.”

“Excuse me?” said Harry.

“You heard me. I saw you. You just tipped something into Ron’s drink. You’ve got the bottle in your hand right now!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Harry, stowing the little bottle hastily in his pocket.

“Ron, I warn you, don’t drink it!” Hermione said again, alarmed, but Ron picked up the glass, drained it in one gulp, and said, “Stop bossing me around, Hermione.”

She looked scandalized. Bending low so that only Harry could hear her, she hissed, “You should be expelled for that. I’d never have believed it of you, Harry!”

“Hark who’s talking,” he whispered back. “Confunded anyone lately?”

She stormed up the table away from them. Harry watched her go without regret. Hermione had never really understood what a serious business Quidditch was. He then looked around at Ron, who was smacking his lips.

“Nearly time,” said Harry blithely.

The frosty grass crunched underfoot as they strode down to the stadium.

“Pretty lucky the weather’s this good, eh?” Harry asked Ron.

“Yeah,” said Ron, who was pale and sick-looking.

Ginny and Demelza were already wearing their Quidditch robes and waiting in the changing room.

“Conditions look ideal,” said Ginny, ignoring Ron. “And guess what? That Slytherin Chaser Vaisey — he took a Bludger in the head yesterday during their practice, and he’s too sore to play! And even better than that — Malfoy’s gone off sick too!”

“*What?*” said Harry, wheeling around to stare at her. “He’s ill? What’s wrong with him?”

“No idea, but it’s great for us,” said Ginny brightly. “They’re playing Harper instead; he’s in my year and he’s an idiot.”

Harry smiled back vaguely, but as he pulled on his scarlet robes his mind was far from Quidditch. Malfoy had once before claimed he could not play due to injury, but on that occasion he had made sure the whole match was rescheduled for a time that suited the Slytherins better. Why was he now happy to let a substitute go on? Was he really ill, or was he faking?

“Fishy, isn’t it?” he said in an undertone to Ron. “Malfoy not playing?”

“Lucky, I call it,” said Ron, looking slightly more animated. “And Vaisey off too, he’s their best goal scorer, I didn’t fancy — hey!” he said suddenly, freezing halfway through pulling on his Keeper’s gloves and staring at Harry.

“What?”

“I . . . you . . .” Ron had dropped his voice, he looked both scared and excited. “My drink . . . my pumpkin juice . . . you didn’t . . . ?”

Harry raised his eyebrows, but said nothing except, “We’ll be starting in about five minutes, you’d better get your boots on.”

They walked out onto the pitch to tumultuous roars and boos. One end of the stadium was solid red and gold; the other, a sea of green

and silver. Many Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had taken sides too: Amidst all the yelling and clapping Harry could distinctly hear the roar of Luna Lovegood's famous lion-topped hat.

Harry stepped up to Madam Hooch, the referee, who was standing ready to release the balls from the crate.

"Captains shake hands," she said, and Harry had his hand crushed by the new Slytherin Captain, Urquhart. "Mount your brooms. On the whistle . . . three . . . two . . . one . . ."

The whistle sounded, Harry and the others kicked off hard from the frozen ground, and they were away.

Harry soared around the perimeter of the grounds, looking around for the Snitch and keeping one eye on Harper, who was zigzagging far below him. Then a voice that was jarringly different to the usual commentator's started up.

"Well, there they go, and I think we're all surprised to see the team that Potter's put together this year. Many thought, given Ronald Weasley's patchy performance as Keeper last year, that he might be off the team, but of course, a close personal friendship with the Captain does help. . . ."

These words were greeted with jeers and applause from the Slytherin end of the pitch. Harry craned around on his broom to look toward the commentator's podium. A tall, skinny blond boy with an upturned nose was standing there, talking into the magical megaphone that had once been Lee Jordan's; Harry recognized Zacharias Smith, a Hufflepuff player whom he heartily disliked.

"Oh, and here comes Slytherin's first attempt on goal, it's Urquhart streaking down the pitch and —"

Harry's stomach turned over.

“— Weasley saves it, well, he's bound to get lucky sometimes, I suppose. . . .”

“That's right, Smith, he is,” muttered Harry, grinning to himself, as he dived amongst the Chasers with his eyes searching all around for some hint of the elusive Snitch.

With half an hour of the game gone, Gryffindor were leading sixty points to zero, Ron having made some truly spectacular saves, some by the very tips of his gloves, and Ginny having scored four of Gryffindor's six goals. This effectively stopped Zacharias wondering loudly whether the two Weasleys were only there because Harry liked them, and he started on Peakes and Coote instead.

“Of course, Coote isn't really the usual build for a Beater,” said Zacharias loftily, “they've generally got a bit more muscle —”

“Hit a Bludger at him!” Harry called to Coote as he zoomed past, but Coote, grinning broadly, chose to aim the next Bludger at Harper instead, who was just passing Harry in the opposite direction. Harry was pleased to hear the dull thunk that meant the Bludger had found its mark.

It seemed as though Gryffindor could do no wrong. Again and again they scored, and again and again, at the other end of the pitch, Ron saved goals with apparent ease. He was actually smiling now, and when the crowd greeted a particularly good save with a rousing chorus of the old favorite “Weasley Is Our King,” he pretended to conduct them from on high.

“Thinks he's something special today, doesn't he?” said a snide voice, and Harry was nearly knocked off his broom as Harper

collided with him hard and deliberately. “Your blood-traitor pal . . .”

Madam Hooch’s back was turned, and though Gryffindors below shouted in anger, by the time she looked around, Harper had already sped off. His shoulder aching, Harry raced after him, determined to ram him back. . . .

“And I think Harper of Slytherin’s seen the Snitch!” said Zacharias Smith through his megaphone. “Yes, he’s certainly seen something Potter hasn’t!”

Smith really was an idiot, thought Harry, hadn’t he noticed them collide? But next moment, his stomach seemed to drop out of the sky — Smith was right and Harry was wrong: Harper had not sped upward at random; he had spotted what Harry had not: The Snitch was speeding along high above them, glinting brightly against the clear blue sky.

Harry accelerated; the wind was whistling in his ears so that it drowned all sound of Smith’s commentary or the crowd, but Harper was still ahead of him, and Gryffindor was only a hundred points up; if Harper got there first Gryffindor had lost . . . and now Harper was feet from it, his hand outstretched. . . .

“Oi, Harper!” yelled Harry in desperation. “How much did Malfoy pay you to come on instead of him?”

He did not know what made him say it, but Harper did a double-take; he fumbled the Snitch, let it slip through his fingers, and shot right past it. Harry made a great swipe for the tiny, fluttering ball and caught it.

“YES!” Harry yelled. Wheeling around, he hurtled back toward the ground, the Snitch held high in his hand. As the crowd realized

what had happened, a great shout went up that almost drowned the sound of the whistle that signaled the end of the game.

“Ginny, where’re you going?” yelled Harry, who had found himself trapped in the midst of a mass midair hug with the rest of the team, but Ginny sped right on past them until, with an almighty crash, she collided with the commentator’s podium. As the crowd shrieked and laughed, the Gryffindor team landed beside the wreckage of wood under which Zacharias was feebly stirring; Harry heard Ginny saying blithely to an irate Professor McGonagall, “Forgot to brake, Professor, sorry.”

Laughing, Harry broke free of the rest of the team and hugged Ginny, but let go very quickly. Avoiding her gaze, he clapped a cheering Ron on the back instead as, all enmity forgotten, the Gryffindor team left the pitch arm in arm, punching the air and waving to their supporters.

The atmosphere in the changing room was jubilant.

“Party up in the common room, Seamus said!” yelled Dean exuberantly. “C’mon, Ginny, Demelza!”

Ron and Harry were the last two in the changing room. They were just about to leave when Hermione entered. She was twisting her Gryffindor scarf in her hands and looked upset but determined.

“I want a word with you, Harry.” She took a deep breath. “You shouldn’t have done it. You heard Slughorn, it’s illegal.”

“What are you going to do, turn us in?” demanded Ron.

“What are you two talking about?” asked Harry, turning away to hang up his robes so that neither of them would see him grinning.

“You know perfectly well what we’re talking about!” said

Hermione shrilly. “You spiked Ron’s juice with lucky potion at breakfast! Felix Felicis!”

“No, I didn’t,” said Harry, turning back to face them both.

“Yes you did, Harry, and that’s why everything went right, there were Slytherin players missing and Ron saved everything!”

“I didn’t put it in!” said Harry, grinning broadly. He slipped his hand inside his jacket pocket and drew out the tiny bottle that Hermione had seen in his hand that morning. It was full of golden potion and the cork was still tightly sealed with wax. “I wanted Ron to think I’d done it, so I faked it when I knew you were looking.” He looked at Ron. “You saved everything because you felt lucky. You did it all yourself.”

He pocketed the potion again.

“There really wasn’t anything in my pumpkin juice?” Ron said, astounded. “But the weather’s good . . . and Vaisey couldn’t play. . . . I honestly haven’t been given lucky potion?”

Harry shook his head. Ron gaped at him for a moment, then rounded on Hermione, imitating her voice. “*You added Felix Felicis to Ron’s juice this morning, that’s why he saved everything! See! I can save goals without help, Hermione!*”

“I never said you couldn’t — Ron, *you* thought you’d been given it too!”

But Ron had already strode past her out of the door with his broomstick over his shoulder.

“Er,” said Harry into the sudden silence; he had not expected his plan to backfire like this, “shall . . . shall we go up to the party, then?”

“You go!” said Hermione, blinking back tears. “I’m *sick* of Ron at the moment, I don’t know what I’m supposed to have done. . . .”

And she stormed out of the changing room too.

Harry walked slowly back up the grounds toward the castle through the crowd, many of whom shouted congratulations at him, but he felt a great sense of letdown; he had been sure that if Ron won the match, he and Hermione would be friends again immediately. He did not see how he could possibly explain to Hermione that what she had done to offend Ron was kiss Viktor Krum, not when the offense had occurred so long ago.

Harry could not see Hermione at the Gryffindor celebration party, which was in full swing when he arrived. Renewed cheers and clapping greeted his appearance, and he was soon surrounded by a mob of people congratulating him. What with trying to shake off the Creevey brothers, who wanted a blow-by-blow match analysis, and the large group of girls that encircled him, laughing at his least amusing comments and batting their eyelids, it was some time before he could try to find Ron. At last, he extricated himself from Romilda Vane, who was hinting heavily that she would like to go to Slughorn’s Christmas party with him. As he was ducking toward the drinks table, he walked straight into Ginny, Arnold the Pygmy Puff riding on her shoulder and Crookshanks mewing hopefully at her heels.

“Looking for Ron?” she asked, smirking. “He’s over there, the filthy hypocrite.”

Harry looked into the corner she was indicating. There, in full view of the whole room, stood Ron wrapped so closely around Lavender Brown it was hard to tell whose hands were whose.

“It looks like he’s eating her face, doesn’t it?” said Ginny dispassionately. “But I suppose he’s got to refine his technique somehow. Good game, Harry.”

She patted him on the arm; Harry felt a swooping sensation in his stomach, but then she walked off to help herself to more butterbeer. Crookshanks trotted after her, his yellow eyes fixed upon Arnold.

Harry turned away from Ron, who did not look like he would be surfacing soon, just as the portrait hole was closing. With a sinking feeling, he thought he saw a mane of bushy brown hair whipping out of sight.

He darted forward, sidestepped Romilda Vane again, and pushed open the portrait of the Fat Lady. The corridor outside seemed to be deserted.

“Hermione?”

He found her in the first unlocked classroom he tried. She was sitting on the teacher’s desk, alone except for a small ring of twittering yellow birds circling her head, which she had clearly just conjured out of midair. Harry could not help admiring her spellwork at a time like this.

“Oh, hello, Harry,” she said in a brittle voice. “I was just practicing.”

“Yeah . . . they’re — er — really good. . . .” said Harry.

He had no idea what to say to her. He was just wondering whether there was any chance that she had not noticed Ron, that she had merely left the room because the party was a little too rowdy, when she said, in an unnaturally high-pitched voice, “Ron seems to be enjoying the celebrations.”

“Er . . . does he?” said Harry.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t see him,” said Hermione. “He wasn’t exactly hiding it, was — ?”

The door behind them burst open. To Harry’s horror, Ron came in, laughing, pulling Lavender by the hand.

“Oh,” he said, drawing up short at the sight of Harry and Hermione.

“Oops!” said Lavender, and she backed out of the room, giggling. The door swung shut behind her.

There was a horrible, swelling, billowing silence. Hermione was staring at Ron, who refused to look at her, but said with an odd mixture of bravado and awkwardness, “Hi, Harry! Wondered where you’d got to!”

Hermione slid off the desk. The little flock of golden birds continued to twitter in circles around her head so that she looked like a strange, feathery model of the solar system.

“You shouldn’t leave Lavender waiting outside,” she said quietly. “She’ll wonder where you’ve gone.”

She walked very slowly and erectly toward the door. Harry glanced at Ron, who was looking relieved that nothing worse had happened.

“*Oppugno!*” came a shriek from the doorway.

Harry spun around to see Hermione pointing her wand at Ron, her expression wild: The little flock of birds was speeding like a hail of fat golden bullets toward Ron, who yelped and covered his face with his hands, but the birds attacked, pecking and clawing at every bit of flesh they could reach.

“Gerremoffme!” he yelled, but with one last look of vindictive fury, Hermione wrenched open the door and disappeared through it. Harry thought he heard a sob before it slammed.

Felix Felicis

Die volgende oggend het Harry heel eerste Kruiekunde. Hy kon nie vir Ron en Hermione met ontbyt van sy les by Dumbledore vertel nie, want hy was te bang hulle word afgeluister, maar hy bring hulle op hoogte terwyl hulle deur die groentetuin na die kweekhuise loop. Die naweek se wilde wind het uiteindelik gaan lê; die vreemde mis is terug en dit neem hulle 'n rukkie langer as gewoonlik om die regte kweekhuis te kry.

“Wow, klink erg, Jy-Weet-Wie as seun,” sê Ron onderlangs terwyl hulle hul plek inneem om een van die knoetsrige Snargaloefstompe, wat hierdie kwartaal se projek is, en hul beskermende handskoene begin aantrek. “Maar ek verstaan nog steeds nie hoekom Dumbledore jou al daai goed wys nie. Ek bedoel, dis baie interessant en alles, maar watse doel dien dit?”

“Weet nie,” sê Harry en sit 'n mondskerm in. “Maar hy sê dis alles belangrik en dit sal my help om te oorleef.”

“Ek dink dis fassinerend,” sê Hermione ernstig. “Dit maak absoluut sin om soveel moontlik van Voldemort te weet. Hoe anders gaan jy uitvind wat sy swakhede is?”

“En hoe was Slughorn se jongste partytjie?” vra Harry dof deur die mondskerm.

“O, eintlik nogal heel lekker,” sê Hermione terwyl sy haar skermbril opsit. “Ek bedoel, hy gaan bietjie aan en aan oor sy beroemde gewese studente en hy kruip vreeslik in by McLaggen oor hy al die regte mense ken, maar ons het lekker kos gekry en hy't ons aan Gwenog Jones voorgestel.”

“Gwenog Jones?” sê Ron en sy oë rek wyd agter sy skermbril. “Dié Gwenog Jones? Die Holyhead Harpies se kaptein?”

“Dis reg,” sê Hermione. “Sy's wat my betref bietjie vol van haarself, maar —”

“Genoeg geginnegaap daar!” sê professor Sprout en kom streng nader. “Julle raak agter; almal het al begin en Neville het reeds sy eerste peul!”

Hulle kyk om en sowaar: Daar sit Neville met 'n bloeiende lip en 'n paar lelike skrape aan die kant van sy gesig, maar hy klou 'n gril-lerige groen, kloppende voorwerp omtrent so groot soos 'n pomelo in sy hand vas.

“Oukei, professor, ons begin dadelik!” roep Ron en toe sy weg-draai, voeg hy sag by: “Jy moes die *Muffliato* gebruik het, Harry.”

“Nee!” sê Hermione dadelik en lyk soos altyd briesend kwaad by die gedagte aan die Halfbloed Prins en sy towerspreuke. “Nou toe ... Ons moet aan die gang kom ...”

Sy kyk besorg vir die ander twee, hulle haal almal diep asem en takel dan die knoetselige stomp voor hulle.

Die stomp kry onmiddellik lewe: Lang, stekelrige, braambosagtige lote skiet boontoe en piets deur die lug. Die een raak in Hermione se hare verstrengel, maar Ron kom hom met 'n snoeiskêr by; Harry kry 'n paar lote beet en knoop hulle aan mekaar vas; daar verskyn 'n opening in die middel van al die tentakeltakke; Hermione steek haar arm dapper by die gat in en dit slaan soos 'n valstrik toe om haar elmboog; Harry en Ron ruk en pluk aan die lote om die gat weer oop te kry en Hermione trek haar arm uit en sy klou 'n peul wat net soos Neville s'n lyk in haar vingers vas. Die stekelrige lote verdwyn meteens en die knoetselige stomp lê weer daar soos 'n onskuldige, dooie stuk hout.

“Weet julle, ek dink nie ek wil eendag wanneer ek my eie plek het van dié goed in my tuin hê nie,” sê Ron terwyl hy sy skermbril teen sy voorkop opdruk en die sweet van sy gesig afvee.

“Gee vir my die bak,” sê Hermione en hou die polsende peul so ver moontlik van haar af weg; Harry gee een aan en sy laat val die peul met 'n gewalgde gesigsuitdrukking daarin.

“Moenie vol femies wees nie; druk hulle uit. Hulle is die beste wanneer hulle vars is!” kondig professor Sprout aan.

“In elk geval,” sit Hermione hul onderbreekte gesprek voort asof hulle nie so pas deur 'n houtstomp aangeval is nie, “Slughorn gaan 'n Kerspartytjie hou, Harry, en jy sal jou nie daaruit kan wikkkel nie, want hy het my gevra om uit te vind watter aande jy beskikbaar is sodat hy seker kan maak hy hou dit op 'n aand wat jy kan kom.”

Harry kreun. Ron, wat die peul in die bak intussen probeer oop-breek deur dit met albei hande beet te kry en so hard moontlik te probeer papdruk, sê vererg: “En dis net nóg 'n partytjie vir al Slug-horn se witbroodjies, hè?”

“Net vir die Slakkeklub, ja,” sê Hermione.

Die peul skiet tussen Ron se vingers uit, tref die kweekhuis se glasdak, spring terug, tref professor Sprout teen die agterkop en

stamp haar ou gelapte hoed af. Harry loop om die peul op te tel; toe hy terugkom, hoor hy Hermione sê: “Luister, dis nie *ek* wat die naam ‘Slakkeklub’ uitgedink het nie –”

“*Slakkeklub*,” herhaal Ron en gryns soos net Malfoy kan. “Dis pateties. Wel, ek hoop julle geniet julle partytjie. Hoekom maak jy nie ogies vir McLaggen nie? Dan kan Slughorn julle Koning en Koningin Slak maak –”

“Ons mag gaste saambring,” sê Hermione, wat om die een of ander rede vuurrooi in die gesig word, “en ek *wou* jou gevra het om saam te kom, maar as jy dink dis so simpel sal ek dit maar liever los!”

Harry wens skielik die peul het nog ’n entjie verder weggevlieg sodat hy nie saam met hulle daar hoef te sit nie. Sonder dat die ander twee dit agterkom, gryp hy die bak met die peul en doen sy bes om dit so hard en energiek moontlik uit te druk, maar ongelukkig hoor hy nog steeds elke woord wat hulle sê.

“Jy *wou* my gevra het?” vra Ron in ’n heel ander stemtoon.

“Ja,” sê Hermione vies. “Maar aangesien jy wil hê ek moet vir McLaggen ogies maak ...”

Daar is ’n pouse terwyl Harry die taai peul aanhoudend met ’n troffel moker.

“Nee, dis nie wat ek wil hê nie,” sê Ron in ’n baie stil stem.

Harry kap die peul mis en breek die bak.

“*Reparo*,” sê hy haastig. Hy tik met sy towerstaf aan die skerwe en die bak maak homself weer heel. Die lawaai maak Ron en Hermione van Harry se teenwoordigheid bewus. Hermione lyk verbouereerd en begin onmiddellik vervaard in haar eksemplaar van *Vleesetende Bome van die Wêreld* rondblaai om uit te vind wat die regte manier is om Snargaloefpeule te versap; Ron, aan die ander kant, lyk verleë, maar taamlik ingenome met homself.

“Gee dit hier, Harry,” sê Hermione haastig. “Dit sê hier ons moet dit met iets skerps prik ...”

Harry gee vir haar die bak met die peul aan. Hy en Ron sit hul skermbrille weer op en bespring die stomp van voor af.

Dit is nie asof hy regtig verbaas is nie, dink Harry terwyl hy stoei met ’n loot vol dorings wat daarop uit is om hom te verwurg; hy het so ’n spesmaas gehad dit gaan vroeër of later gebeur. Maar hy is nie seker hoe hy daaroor voel nie ... hy en Cho is deesdae te skaam om eens vir mekaar te kyk, laat staan nog van met mekaar praat; sê nou Ron en Hermione begin uitgaan en los mekaar dan? Sal hul vriendskap dit oorleef? Harry onthou die paar weke in hul derde jaar toe hulle nie met mekaar gepraat het nie; dit was nie vir hom lekker om

die afstand tussen hulle te probeer oorbrug nie. En sê nou hulle los mekaar nie? Wat as hulle soos Bill en Fleur word en dit word onuitstaanbaar in hul teenwoordigheid en hy word vir goed uitgesluit?

“Het jou!” gil Ron en trek ’n tweede peul uit die stomp net toe Hermione die eerste een oopkry; die bak is nou vol dun knolle wat soos bleek groen wurms wriemel.

Die res van die les gaan verby sonder dat Slughorn se partytjie weer genoem word. Die volgende paar dae hou Harry sy twee vriende fyner dop, maar hy kom niks agter aan Ron en Hermione nie, behalwe dat hulle ietwat meer beleefd as gewoonlik met mekaar is. Harry veronderstel hy sal maar net moet wag en kyk wat die aand van die partytjie onder die invloed van Botterbier in Slughorn se dofverligte kantoor gebeur. Intussen is daar egter belangriker dinge wat hom bekommer.

Katie Bell is nog steeds in Sint Mungo se hospitaal met geen vooruitsigte om ontslaan te word nie; dit beteken die belowende Gryffindorspan wat Harry nou al sedert September so nougeset afrig, kom een Jaer kort. Hy stel dit heelyd uit om Katie te vervang, hopende dat sy sal terugkom, maar hul eerste wedstryd teen Slytherin is om die draai en Harry moet uiteindelik aanvaar dat sy nie betyds terug gaan wees om te kan speel nie.

Harry sien nie kans vir nóg ’n volle proewedag nie. Met ’n swaar hart wat niks met Kwiddiek te doen het nie, keer hy Dean Thomas eendag ná Transfigurasië voor. Die meeste van die klas het reeds geloop, al vlieg daar nog ’n hele paar kwetterende geel voëltjies, almal Hermione se skeppings, in die vertrek rond; niemand anders kon eens ’n veer uit die niet optower nie.

“Stel jy nog belang om Jaer te speel?”

“Wa – ? Ja, natuurlik!” sê Dean opgewonde. Oor Dean se skouer sien Harry hoe Seamus Finnigan sy boeke met ’n suur gesig in sy sak smyt. Een van die redes hoekom Harry dit sou verkies om Dean nie te vra om te speel nie, is omdat hy weet Seamus sal nie daarvan hou nie. Aan die ander kant moet hy doen wat die beste vir die span is en Dean het met die proewe beter as Seamus gevlieg.

“Oukei, dan is jy in,” sê Harry. “Ons oefen vanaand, sewe-uur.”

“Reg,” sê Dean. “Dankie, Harry! Sjoë, ek kan nie wag om vir Ginny te gaan sê nie!”

Hy nael by die klas uit en laat Harry en Seamus alleen agter. Die ongemaklike atmosfeer word vererger deur een van Hermione se kanaries wat in die verbyvlieg op Seamus se kop tjorts.

Seamus is nie al een wat ongelukkig is met die keuse van Katie se plaasvervanger nie. Daar word baie in die geselskamer gebrom

oor die feit dat Harry nou twee van sy klasmaats vir die span gekies het. Harry moes al baie erger gebrom as hierdie in sy skoolloopbaan verduur en daarom steur hy hom nie veel daaraan nie, maar nogtans, die druk om hul eerste kragmeting teen Slytherin te wen, is nou selfs groter as voorheen. Harry weet hoe dit gaan: As Gryffindor wen, sal die hele huis vergeet hulle het hom gekritiseer en sweer hulle het altyd geweet dit is 'n wonderlike span. Maar as hulle verloor, dink Harry wrang, sal hy 'n veel erger gebrom moet verduur.

Harry het geen rede om sy keuse te berou toe hy Dean daardie aand sien vlieg nie; hy werk goed saam met Ginny en Demelza. Die Brekers, Peakes en Coote, verbeter nog steeds. Die enigste probleem is Ron.

Harry weet lankal Ron is 'n wisselvallige speler wat maklik ontsenu raak en min selfvertroue het, en die vooruitsig van die seisoen se eerste wedstryd wat nader kom, bring weer al sy ou onsekerhede terug. Nadat hy 'n halfdosyn doele deurgelaat het waarvan Ginny die meeste aanteken, begin hy al wilder en wilder speel en gee die aankomende Demelza Robins op die ou end 'n opstopper deur die mond.

“Dit was 'n ongeluk. Ek's jammer, Demelza, ek's rêrig jammer!” roep Ron agter haar aan terwyl sy af grond toe tuimel met bloed wat oral drup. “Ek het net –”

“Paniekerig geraak,” sê Ginny vies. Sy land langs Demelza en bekijk haar dik lip. “Jou aapstert, Ron; kyk hoe lyk sy nou!”

“Ek sal dit regmaak,” sê Harry en land tussen die twee meisies. Hy wys met sy towerstaf na Demelza se mond en sê “*Episkey*,” en dan: “Ginny, moenie Ron 'n aapstert noem nie; jy's nie die span se kaptein nie –”

“Wel, jy was te besig om hom 'n aapstert te noem en ek het gedink iemand behoort –”

Harry dwing homself om nie te lag nie.

“In die lug, almal; weg is ons ...”

In die geheel gesien, is dit een van hul vrotste oefensessies nóg hierdie kwartaal, maar Harry voel nie hy kan eerlik daaroor wees noudat die wedstryd so naby is nie.

“Goeie werk, almal; ek dink ons gaan Slytherin afslag,” sê hy bemoedigend en die Jaers en Brekers loop heel tevrede met hulself by die kleedkamer uit.

“Ek het soos draakbollie gespeel,” sê Ron in 'n hol stem ná die deur agter Ginny toegeswaai het.

“Nee, jy het nie,” sê Harry ferm. “Jy was die beste Wagter by die proewe. Jou enigste probleem is jou senuwees.”

Hy praat Ron heelpad terug kasteel toe moed in en teen die tyd dat hulle op die tweede verdieping kom, lyk Ron al heelwat vroliker.

Hulle vat die gewone kortpad op na Gryffindortoring, maar toe Harry egter die tapisserie oopskuif, kyk hulle na Dean en Ginny wat daar in 'n vurige omhelsing staan en soen asof hulle aan mekaar vasgegom is.

Dit is asof iets groots en skubberigs in Harry se maag wakker word en aan sy binnegoed krap; dit voel of sy brein deur warm bloed benewel word sodat hy nie meer reg kan dink nie; sy enigste gedagte is 'n barbaarse begeerte om Dean in jellie te toor. Terwyl hy nog met hierdie skielike waansin worstel, hoor hy Ron se stem asof van baie ver af.

"Jig!"

Dean en Ginny spring weg van mekaar en kyk om.

"Wat?" sê Ginny.

"Ek wil nie my eie suster in die openbaar sien vry nie!"

"Die gang was leeg voor julle hier ingebars het!" kap Ginny terug.

Dean lyk verleë. Hy grinnik vlugtig vir Harry, wat nie terug lag nie, want die pasgebore monster in hom brul dat hy Dean onmiddellik uit die span moet smyt.

"E ... kom, Ginny," sê Dean. "Kom ons gaan terug geselskamer toe ..."

"Gaan jy!" sê Ginny. "Ek het 'n appeltjie met my liewe broer te skill!"

Dean loop en lyk bly dat hy hom uit die voete kan maak.

"Reg," sê Ginny en gooi haar lang rooi hare uit haar gesig terwyl sy Ron aangluur, "kom ons verstaan mekaar nou baie mooi. Dit traak jou nie met wie ek uitgaan of wat ek met hulle doen nie, Ron —"

"Tuurlik traak dit my!" sê Ron, net so kwaad. "Dink jy ek wil hê mense moet sê my suster is 'n —"

"'n Wat?" gil Ginny en pluk haar towerstaf uit. "'n Wat presies?"

"Hy bedoel niks daarmee nie, Ginny —" sê Harry outomaties, al stem die monster heelhartig saam met Ron.

"O ja, tog!" vlieg sy Harry in. "Net omdat hy nog nooit in sy lewe met iemand gevry het nie, net omdat die beste soen wat hy nog ooit gekry het ons tant Muriel s'n was —"

"Sjarrap!" bulder Ron, wat rooi verbystee en pers word.

"Nee, ek sal nie!" gil Ginny rasend van woede. "Ek het jou dopgehou met Slymbol; elke keer dat jy haar sien, hoop jy sy gaan jou op die wang soen. Dis pateties! As jy 'n slag uitgaan en self 'n bietjie vry, sal jy nie so te kere gaan oor al die ander wat dit doen nie!"

Ron het sy towerstaf ook nou uitgepluk; Harry beweeg vinnig tussen hulle in.

“Jy weet nie waarvan jy praat nie!” brul Ron en probeer Ginny onder skoot kry, maar Harry staan met uitgestrekte arms voor haar. “Ek doen dit net nie soos jy in die openbaar nie!”

Ginny lag Ron uit en probeer Harry uit die pad stoot.

“Soen jy vir Pigwidgeon? Of steek jy ’n foto van tant Muriel onder jou kussing weg?”

“Jou –”

’n Oranje ligstraal vlieg onder Harry se linkerarm deur en mis Ginny rakelings; Harry druk Ron teen die muur vas.

“Moenie simpel wees nie –”

“Harry het met Cho Chang gevry!” skree Ginny vir Ron en klink nou na aan trane. “En Hermione het met Viktor Krum gevry. Dis net jy wat maak of dit iets walgliks is, en dis oor jy omtrent soveel ondervinding soos ’n twaalfjarige het!”

En daarmee storm sy weg. Harry los Ron dadelik; die uitdrukking op sy gesig is moordlustig. Hulle staan al twee daar en haal swaar asem tot mevrou Norris, Filch se kat, om die hoek verskyn en die spanning verbreek.

“Komaan,” sê Harry toe hulle Filch skuifelend hoor nader kom.

Hulle gaan haastig met die trap op en met die sewende verdieping se gang af. “Hei, uit my pad uit!” blaf Ron vir ’n meisietjie wat verskrik opsy spring en ’n bottel paddaeiers laat val.

Harry hoor skaars die glas breek; hy voel gedisorïenteerd en duiselig, asof ’n weerligstraal hom getref het. *Dis net omdat sy Ron se suster is, sê hy vir homself. Dit was vir jou erg om te sien hoe sy Dean soen omdat sy Ron se suster is ...*

Maar skielik verskyn daar voor sy geestesoog die ongevraagde beeld van hom wat Ginny in daardie verlate gang soen ... Die monster in sy borskas spin tevrede ... maar dan sien hy hoe Ron die tapisseriegordyn oopruk en sy towerstaf op hom wat Harry is, rig en goed skree soos “jou verraaier” ... “kastig my vriend”...

“Dink jy Hermione hét met Krum gevry?” vra Ron skielik terwyl hulle na die Vet Vrou toe aanstap. Harry skrik skuldig en dwing sy gedagtes weg van ’n gang waarin Ron nie tussenbeide kom nie, ’n gang waar hy en Ginny heeltemal alleen is –

“Wat?” vra hy verward. “O ... e ...”

Die eerlike antwoord is “ja”, maar hy wil dit nie sê nie. Dit lyk egter of Ron die ergste aflei uit die uitdrukking op Harry se gesig.

“Draakdroesem,” mompel hy onheilspellend vir die Vet Vrou en hulle klim deur die portretopening tot in die geselskamer.

Nie een van hulle noem weer Ginny of Hermione se name nie;

om die waarheid te sê, hulle praat daardie aand skaars met mekaar en gaan in stilte bed toe, elkeen verdiep in sy eie gedagtes.

Harry lê lank wakker en kyk op na sy hemelbed se kap terwyl hy homself probeer oortuig sy gevoelens vir Ginny is net dié van 'n ouer broer. Hulle het tog heelsomer soos broer en suster saam gebly en Kwiddiek gespeel, Ron geterg en vir Bill en Slymbol gelag, nie waar nie? Hy ken Ginny nou al jare lank ... Dis natuurlik dat hy beskermend teenoor haar sal voel ... natuurlik dat hy op die uitkyk vir haar sal wees ... dat hy Dean uitmekaar wil skeur oor hy haar gesoen het ... nee ... Hy sal hierdie spesifieke broederlike gevoel in toom moet hou ...

Ron gee 'n harde snork.

Sy's Ron se suster, sê Harry streng vir homself. Ron se suster. Sy's taboe. Hy sal sy vriendskap met Ron vir niks ter wêreld op die spel plaas nie. Hy slaan sy kussing met sy vuiste in 'n gemakliker vorm in en wag dat die slaap moet kom terwyl hy sy bes doen om te keer dat sy gedagtes na Ginny toe afdwaal.

Die volgende oggend word Harry bedremmeld en deur die wind wakker ná 'n reeks drome van Ron wat hom met 'n Breker se knuppel jaag, maar teen die middag sou hy die droom-Ron met graagte verruil vir die regte een wat Ginny en Dean nou totaal ignoreer en 'n seer-gemaakte en verwarde Hermione met ysige, sarkastiese afsydigheid behandel. Wat meer is, Ron het blykbaar oornag so liggeraak en bakleierig soos die gemiddelde Spuitstertkrewel geword. Harry probeer heeldag tevergeefs die vrede tussen Ron en Hermione bewaar; op die ou end gaan Hermione hoog die duiwel in slaap en Ron strompel na die seuns se slaapsaal terwyl hy woedend op 'n paar verskrikte eerstejaars vloek omdat hulle vir hom kyk.

Tot Harry se ontsteltenis neem Ron se aggressie nie die volgende paar dae af nie. Om sake te vererger, val dit saam met 'n selfs nog groter laagtepunt in sy vaardighede as Wagter, wat hom net nóg aggressiewer maak. Tydens die laaste Kwiddiekoefening voor Saterdag se wedstryd kan hy nie een enkele doelskoot wat die Jaers op hom afstuur, keer nie en hy skel almal só erg uit dat Demelza Robins in trane uitbars.

"Hou jou mond en los haar uit!" skree Peakes. Hy is omtrent 'n derde korter as Ron, maar het darem 'n swaar knuppel in die hand.

"GENOEG!" bulder Harry, wat sien hoe Ginny in Ron se rigting gluur en haar reputasie as 'n gedugte uitspreker van Vlermuiverskrikkervloeke onthou. Hy vlieg nader om tussenbeide te tree voor dinge handuit ruk. "Peakes, gaan pak die Mokkers weg. Demelza, ruk jou reg; jy't vandag baie goed gespeel. Ron ..." en hy wag tot die

res van die span buite hoorafstand is voor hy dit sê, “jy’s my beste vriend, maar as jy aanhou om die ander só te behandel, gaan ek jou uit die span skop.”

Hy is vir ’n oomblik seker Ron gaan hom te lyf gaan, maar dan gebeur daar iets baie ergers: Ron sak inmekaar op sy besem; al die veglus is nou uit hom en hy sê: “Ek bedank. Ek’s pateties.”

“Jy’s nie pateties nie en jy gaan nie bedank nie!” sê Harry kwaai en gryp Ron voor aan sy kleed. “As jy op jou stukke is, kan jy enige skoot keer. Jou probleem is in jou kop!”

“Sê jy ek’s van my kop af?”

“Ja, miskien is jy!”

Hulle gluur mekaar vir ’n oomblik aan en dan skud Ron sy kop moeg.

“Ek weet jy het nie tyd om ’n ander Wagter te kry nie, so ek sal môre speel, maar as ons verloor, en ons gáán, haal ek myself uit die span uit.”

Niks wat Harry sê, maak enige verskil nie. Dwarsdeur aandete probeer hy aan Ron se selfvertroue werk, maar Ron is te besig om suur en nors met Hermione te wees om enigiets agter te kom. Harry probeer die aand in die geselskamer verder, maar sy stelling dat die hele span verpletter sal wees as Ron hom onttrek, word ietwat ondermyn deur die feit dat die res van die span ver van hulle af saamgebondel sit en duidelik oor Ron brom en vir hom vuil kyke gee. Uiteindelik probeer Harry weer kwaad word in die hoop dat Ron hom sal vererg en hom sal voorneem om al wat ’n doel is, te keer, maar dié strategie werk blykbaar niks beter as aanmoediging nie; Ron gaan weer net so moedeloos en troosteloos soos voorheen slaap.

Harry lê lank in die donker wakker. Hy wil nie hierdie wedstryd verloor nie; dit is nie net sy eerste wedstryd as kaptein nie, maar hy is ook vasberade om Draco Malfoy met Kwiddiek te klop, selfs al kon hy nog nie sy vermoedens oor hom bewys nie. Maar as Ron soos met die laaste paar oefensessies speel, is hul kanse om te wen bitter skraal ...

As hy net iets kan doen om Ron sover te kry om hom reg te ruk ... om hom op sy beste te laat speel ... iets wat sal maak dat Ron regtig ’n goeie dag beleef ...

En die antwoord skiet Harry met skielike, skitterende inspirasie te binne.

Die volgende oggend begin die opwinding al met ontbyt opbou; die Slytherins sis en boe hard elke keer dat een van Gryffindor se spanlede by die Groot Saal inkom. Harry kyk op plafon toe en sien die lug is wolkloos en bleekblou: ’n goeie teken.

Die Gryffindortafel, 'n soliede massa van rooi en goud, juig toe Harry en Ron inkom. Harry lag en waai; Ron gryns swakkies en skud sy kop.

“Moed hou, Ron!” sê Lavender. “Ek weet jy sal briljant wees!”
Ron ignoreer haar.

“Tee?” vra Harry vir hom. “Koffie? Pampoensap?”

“Enigiets,” sê Ron stuurs en vat stug 'n hap roosterbrood.

'n Paar minute later kom Hermione agter hulle staan. Sy is al so moeg vir Ron se onplesierige gedrag die afgelope tyd dat sy nie saam met hulle kom ontbyt eet het nie.

“Hoe voel julle twee?” vra sy aarselend met haar oë op Ron se agterkop.

“Piekfyn,” sê Harry, wat konsentreer op die glas pampoensap wat hy vir Ron aangee. “Daar's hy, Ron. Drink dit op.”

Ron lig die glas na sy lippe, maar dan praat Hermione skerp.

“Moenie dit drink nie, Ron!”

Harry en Ron kyk haar aan.

“Hoekom nie?” vra Ron.

Hermione staar na Harry asof sy haar oë nie kan glo nie.

“Jy het iets in daai sap gegooi.”

“Ekskuus?” sê Harry.

“Jy't my gehoor. Ek het jou gesien. Jy het iets in Ron se sap gegooi. Die botteltjie is nog steeds in jou hand!”

“Ek weet nie waarvan jy praat nie,” sê Harry en stop die botteltjie dadelik in sy sak.

“Ron, ek waarsku jou, moenie dit drink nie!” sê Hermione weer ontsteld, maar Ron tel die glas op, drink dit met een sluk leeg en sê: “Hou op om vir my te sê wat om te doen, Hermione.”

Sy lyk verontwaardig. Hermione buk laag af sodat net Harry haar kan hoor en sis: “Jy behoort hiervoor geskors te word. Ek sou dit nooit van jou geglo het nie, Harry!”

“Hoor wie praat,” fluister hy. “Wanneer laas het jy 'n Warvloek uitgespreek?”

Sy storm na die punt van die tafel, weg van hulle af. Harry is nie spyt dat sy loop nie. Hermione kon nog nooit verstaan hoe 'n ernstige saak Kwiddiek is nie. Dan kyk hy weer na Ron, wat sy lippe smak.

“Amper tyd,” sê Harry opgewek.

Die gevriesde gras kraak onder hul skoene wanneer hulle af stadion toe stap.

“Ons is gelukkig dis sulke lekker weer, nê?” sê Harry vir Ron.

“Ja,” sê Ron en lyk bleek en siek.

Ginny en Demelza het reeds hul Kwiddiekklere aan en wag in die kleedkamer.

“Omstandighede lyk ideaal,” sê Ginny en ignoreer Ron. “En raai wat? Daai Jaer van Slytherin, Vaisey – het gister toe hulle geoefen het ’n Moker teen die kop gekry en kan nie vandag speel nie! En selfs nog beter as dit – Malfoy is ook siek!”

“Wat?” sê Harry en swaai om na haar. “Hy’s siek? Wat makeer hom?”

“G’n idee nie, maar dit pas ons,” sê Ginny uitgelate. “Hulle laat Harper in sy plek speel; hy’s in my jaar en hy’s ’n idioot.”

Harry glimlag vaagweg terug, maar terwyl hy sy skarlakenrooi kleed aantrek, is sy gedagtes ver van Kwiddiek af. Malfoy het al eenkeer vantevore beweer hy kan as gevolg van ’n besering nie speel nie, maar toe het hy seker gemaak die hele wedstryd word herskeduleer vir ’n tyd wat die Slytherins beter pas. Hoekom sal hy nou sommer-so toelaat dat ’n reserwe in sy plek speel? Is hy regtig siek of sit hy aan?

“Verdag, nê?” sê hy gedemp vir Ron. “Malfoy wat nie speel nie.”

“Ek noem dit geluk,” sê Ron, wat nou effens lewendiger lyk. “En met Vaisey wat ook uit is; hy’s hul beste doelskieter en ek was bekommerd – hei!” sê hy skielik, los sy halfpad aangetrekte Wagterhandskoene net so en staar na Harry.

“Wat?”

“Ek ... jy ...” Ron laat sak sy stem; hy lyk bang en opgewonde tegelyk. “My sap ... my pampoensap ... Het jy ...?”

Harry lig sy wenkbroue, maar al wat hy sê, is: “Ons begin oor vyf minute; julle moet julle stewels aantrek.”

Hulle loop onder dawerende gejuig en geboe op die veld. Die een kant van die stadion is solied rooi en geel; die ander kant ’n see van groen en silwer. Baie Hoesenproesers en Raweklouers het ook kant gekies: tussen al die gejl en handeklap hoor Harry duidelik hoe brul Luna Lovegood se beroemde leeuhoed.

Harry loop tot by Madame Hooch, die skeidsregter, wat gereed staan om die balle uit die krat vry te laat.

“Kapteins, skud hande,” sê sy en dit voel vir Harry of Urquhart, Slytherin se nuwe kaptein, sy hand vergruis. “Bestyg jul besems. Wag vir die fluitjie ... drie ... twee ... een ...”

Die fluitjie blaas, en Harry en die ander skop hard op die gevriesde grond vas en weg is hulle.

Harry vlieg hoog op en verken die buiterand van die veld op soek na die Snip terwyl hy sy een oog op Harper hou wat ver onderkant hom heen en weer vleg. Dan skrik hy vir die kommentator se stem wat skielik so steurend anders as die gewone een s’n klink.

“Wel, daar gaan hulle nou, en ek dink ons is almal verbaas oor die span wat Potter vir vanjaar gekies het. Baie van ons het gedink ná sy wisselvallige vertoning van laas jaar sal Ron Weasley nie die span haal nie, maar dit help natuurlik om ’n goeie pêl van die kaptein te wees ...”

Hierdie woorde word met ’n gespot en applous van Slytherin se kant van die veld begroet. Harry rek sy nek en kyk af na die kommentator se podium. ’n Lang, maer blonde seun met ’n wipneus staan daar en praat in die magiese megafoon wat vroeër aan Lee Jordan behoort het; Harry herken Zacharias Smith, ’n Hoesenproesspeler van wie hy net mooi niks hou nie. “O, en hier kom Slytherin se eerste poging om ’n doel aan te teken; dis Urquhart wat blitsig met die veld afpyl en –”

Harry se maag gee ’n draai.

– Weasley keer hom. Wel, hy moet seker ook partykeer ’n gelukkie kry ...”

“Dis reg, Smith,” mompel Harry en grinnik by homself terwyl hy tussen die Jaers afduik en sy oë oophou vir enige teken van die ontwykende Snip.

Ná ’n halfuur se spel loop Gryffindor met sestig punte teen nul voor: Ron keer ’n hele paar doele op skouspelagtige wyse, soms net met die punt van sy handskoene, en Ginny teken vier van Gryffindor se ses doele aan. Zacharias hou op om hardop te wonder of die twee Weasleys die span net gehaal het omdat Harry van hulle hou en begin Peakes en Coote nou uitmekaar trek.

“Coote het natuurlik nie eintlik die regte bou vir ’n Breker nie,” sê Zacharias uit die hoogte, “want hulle is gewoonlik meer gespierd –”

“Moker hom met ’n Moker!” skree Harry in die verbyvlieg vir Coote, maar Coote lag net breed en verkies om die Moker na Harper te mik wat Harry net toe in die teenoorgestelde rigting verbysteek. Harry is tevrede om ’n dowwe *doef* te hoor, wat beteken die Moker het sy teiken getref.

Dit lyk of Gryffindor niks verkeerd kan doen nie. Hulle teken keer op keer doele aan, en keer op keer verhoed Ron met oënskynlike gemak aan die ander kant van die veld doele. Hy glimlag nou selfs en toe die skare ’n besonder goeie keerslag met die bemoedigende koorgedeelte van die ou, gewilde *Weasley is ons Koning* begroet, dirigeer hy hulle kastig van bo uit die lug.

“Dink hy’s vandag die kat se snor, nè?” sê ’n snedige stem en Harry word amper van sy besem af gegooi toe Harper opsetlik hard in hom vasjaag. “Jou pêl, die bloedverraaier ...”

Madame Hooch staan met haar rug na hulle toe en hoewel die

Gryffindors onder woedend uitroep, het Harper al weer padgegee teen die tyd dat sy omkyk. Harry se skouer pyn en hy sit Harper agterna, vasberade om hom terug te kry ...

“En ek dink Harper van Slytherin het die Snip gesien!” sê Zacharias Smith deur sy megafoon. “Ja, hy’t definitief iets gesien wat Potter nie gesien het nie!”

Smith is regtig onnosel, dink Harry; het hy nie gesien hoe hulle bots nie? Maar die volgende oomblik voel dit of sy maag tot onder op die grond val – Smith is reg en hy wat Harry is, is verkeerd: Harper jaag nie net blindweg boontoe nie; hy het iets raak gesien wat Harry gemis het; die Snip skiet hoog bo hulle verby en glinster blink in die helderblou lug.

Harry vlieg vinniger; die wind suis so hard in sy ore dat dit alle klank van Smith se kommentaar en die skare verdoof, maar Harper is nog steeds voor hom en Gryffindor loop net met ’n honderd punte voor; as Harper eerste daar kom, verloor Gryffindor ... Harper is nou baie naby; hy steek sy hand uit na die Snip ...

“Hei, Harper!” gil Harry uit desperaatheid. “Hoeveel het Malfoy jou betaal om in sy plek te kom speel?”

Hy weet nie wat hom dit laat sê het nie, maar Harper verstar vir ’n oomblik; hy vat die Snip mis, laat dit deur sy vingers glip en jaag verby. Harry se arm skiet uit na die klein, fladderende balletjie en hy vang dit.

“JIP!” gil Harry. Hy swaai om en duik af grond toe met die Snip omhoog in sy hand. Die skare besef wat gebeur het en juig só hard dat ’n mens amper nie die eindfluitjie kan hoor nie.

“Ginny, waarheen gaan jy?” roep Harry, wat tussen hemel en aarde in die middel van ’n massaomhelsing met die res van die span vasgevang is, maar Ginny skiet verby hulle totdat sy met ’n allemintige slag in die kommentator se podium vasvlieg. Terwyl die skare gil en lag, land die Gryffindorspan langs die houtstukke waaronder Zacharias ’n flou poging aanwend om te roer; Harry hoor hoe sê Ginny vrolik vir ’n woedende professor McGonagall: “Jammer, professor; ek het vergeet om te rem.”

Harry breek laggend weg van die res van die span en omhels Ginny, maar los haar vinnig weer. Hy vermy haar oë en klop ’n juigende Ron op die skouer. Al die onmin is vergete; Gryffindor se span loop ingehaak by mekaar en vuiste in die lug van die veld af en waai vir hul ondersteuners.

Die atmosfeer in die kleedkamer is jubelend.

“Seamus sê ons gaan in die geselskamer partytjie hou!” gil Dean uitgelate. “Komaan, Ginny, Demelza!”

Ron en Harry bly alleen in die kleedkamer agter. Hulle wil net loop toe Hermione inkom. Sy wring haar Gryffindorserp in haar hande en lyk ontsteld, maar vasberade.

“Ek wil met jou praat, Harry.” Sy haal diep asem. “Jy moes dit nie gedoen het nie. Jy’t gehoor wat Slughorn sê; dis onwettig.”

“Wat gaan jy doen? Op ons klik?” wil Ron weet.

“Waarvan praat julle twee?” vra Harry en draai weg om sy kleed op te hang sodat hulle nie kan sien hy glimlag nie.

“Jy weet baie goed waarvan ons praat!” sê Hermione skril. “Jy het daai geluksdrankie met ontbyt in Ron se sap gegooi! Felix Felicis!”

“Nee, ek het nie,” sê Harry en draai terug na hulle.

“Ja, jy het, Harry. Dis hoekom dit so goed gegaan het en daar van Slytherin se ouens nie kon speel nie en Ron so briljant gespeel het!”

“Ek het dit nie ingegooi nie!” sê Harry en glimlag nou breed. Hy steek sy hand in sy baadjiesak en haal die botteltjie wat Hermione die oggend in sy hand gesien het uit. Dit is gevul met ’n goue towerdrankie en die kurk is nog steeds met was verseël. “Ek wou hê Ron moes dink ek het dit gedoen, toe maak ek of ek dit ingooi toe ek weet jy kyk.” Hy kyk na Ron. “Jy het briljant gespeel omdat jy geglo het die geluk is aan jou kant. Jy het dit alles self gedoen.”

Hy sit die towerdrankie weer in sy sak.

“Was daar regtig niks in my pampoensap nie?” vra Ron verstom. “Maar die lekker weer ... en Vaisey wat nie kon speel nie ... Het jy regtig nie vir my van daai geluksdrankie gegee nie?”

Harry skud sy kop. Ron gaap hom nog vir ’n oomblik aan, dan draai hy om na Hermione en maak haar stem na.

“Jy’t vanoggend Felix Felicis in Ron se sap gegooi; dis hoekom hy so briljant gespeel het! Sien jy nou! Ek kan sonder hulp doelskote keer, Hermione!”

“Ek het nog nooit gesê jy kan nie – Ron, jy het ook gedink Harry het dit vir jou ingegeel!”

Maar Ron loop met sy besemstok oor sy skouer verby haar en verdwyn by die deur uit.

“E,” sê Harry in die skielike stilte; hy het nie verwag sy plan gaan só boemerang nie, “sal ... sal ons gaan partytjie hou?”

“Gaan jy!” sê Hermione en knip haar trane weg. “Ek is op die oomblik sat vir Ron; ek weet nie wat ek veronderstel was om te doen nie ...”

En sy storm ook by die kleedkamer uit.

Harry loop stadig met die skoolgrond op terug kasteel toe. Hy vleg deur die skare wat hom gelukwensingse toeroep, maar hy voel verskriklik teleurgesteld; hy was seker as Ron goed gespeel het, sal

hy en Hermione dadelik weer vriende wees. Hy weet nie hoe hy vir Hermione moet verduidelik dat Ron kwaad is omdat sy Viktor Krum gesoen het nie, veral nie omdat sy die oortreding so lank gelede al begaan het nie.

Harry sien Hermione nie by Gryffindor se feesvieringe nie; die partytjie is reeds in volle gang wanneer hy opdaag. Toe hy verskyn, is daar opnuut 'n gejuig en hande klap en hy is gou omring deur 'n hele klomp mense wat hom gelukwens. Hy moet eers die Creeveybroers, wat die wedstryd tot in die fynste besonderhede wil ontleed, en die groot groep meisies wat hom omsingel en giggel en hul ooglede fladder as hy iets doodgewoons sê, afskud voor hy 'n ruk later na Ron kan begin soek. Harry wikkel hom uiteindelik los van Romilda Vane, wat hard skimp om saam met hom na Slughorn se Kerspartytjie toe te gaan. Hy koes om by die tafel met die drankies uit te kom en loop hom vas in Ginny, met Arnold die Pigmee Poffie op haar skouer en Kromskeen wat hoopvol langs haar hakke miaau.

“Soek jy na Ron?” vra sy en trek skewebek. “Hy’s daar, die vieslike huigelaar.”

Harry kyk na die hoek waarheen sy beduie. Daar, in volle aan-skoue van die hele vertrek, staan Ron so styf teenaan Lavender Brown dat dit moeilik is om te sê wie se hande wie s’n is.

“Dit lyk of hy haar gesig eet, nè?” sê Ginny emosieloos. “Maar hy leer seker maar nog? Goed gespeel, Harry.”

Sy tik liggies op sy arm; Harry voel sy maag in sy keel opskiet, maar dan loop sy weg en gaan kry vir haar nog Botterbier. Kromskeen trippel agter haar aan, sy oë vasgenael op Arnold.

Harry draai weg van Ron, wat nie lyk asof hy haastig is om gou weer lug te skep nie, en is net betyds om die portretopening te sien toegaan. Hy verbeel hom hy sien 'n dik bos bruin hare verdwyn en daar is 'n nare kol op sy maag.

Hy beweeg vinnig vorentoe, ontduik Romilda Vane weer, en stoot die Vet Vrou se portret oop. Die gang buite lyk verlate.

“Hermione?”

Hy kry haar in die eerste klaskamer wat nie gesluit is nie. Sy sit op die onderwyser se lessenaar, alleen behalwe die kwetterende geel voëltjies wat sy duidelik uit die niet opgetower het en wat nou in sirkels om haar kop vlieg. Harry kan nie help om haar towervernuf op 'n oomblik soos dié te bewonder nie.

“O hallo, Harry,” sê sy en klink broos. “Ek oefen sommer.”

“Ja ... Jy’s – e – regtig goed ...” sê Harry.

Hy het nie die vaagste benul wat om vir haar te sê nie. Net toe hy begin wonder of sy Ron miskien nie gesien het nie, of sy dalk net

by die geselskamer uit is omdat die feesviering bietjie raserig was, sê sy in 'n onnatuurlik hoë stem: "Dit lyk of Ron die partytjie geniet."

"E ... regtig?" sê Harry.

"Moenie maak of jy hom nie gesien het nie," sê Hermione. "Hy steek dit nie eintlik weg nie, nè?"

Die deur agter hulle bars oop. Tot Harry se ontsteltenis kom Ron laggend met Lavender aan die hand ingeloop. "O," sê hy en gaan staan toe hy Harry en Hermione sien.

"Oeps!" sê Lavender en gee giggelend pad uit die klas. Die deur gaan agter haar toe.

Daar is 'n aaklige stilte wat opbou tot 'n vloedgolf. Hermione staar na Ron wat weier om vir haar te kyk, maar met 'n vreemde mengsel van bravade en ongemak sê: "Haai, Harry! Gewonder wat van jou geword het!"

Hermione gly van die lessenaar af. Die swerm geel voëltjies vlieg nog steeds kwetterend om haar kop rond sodat sy soos 'n vreemde, veeragtige uitbeelding van die sonnestelsel lyk. "Jy moenie Lavender buite laat wag nie," sê sy sag. "Sy sal wonder waar jy is."

Sy loop baie stadig en regop na die deur. Harry loer vir Ron, wat verlig lyk dat daar niks ergers gebeur het nie.

"*Oppugno!*" kom daar 'n kreet van die deur af.

Harry swaai om en sien hoe Hermione haar towerstaf met 'n wilde uitdrukking op Ron rig; die swerm voëltjies pyl nou soos 'n goue koeëlreën op Ron af. Hy los 'n tjankgeluid en druk sy gesig met sy hande toe, maar die voëltjies val hom aan en pik en klou na elke stukkie vleis wat hulle kan bykom.

"Kryhullevanmyaf!" gil Ron, maar met een laaste kyk van wraak-sugtige woede pluk Hermione die deur oop en verdwyn buitentoe. Harry verbeel hom hy hoor 'n snik voor die deur toeklap.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



THE UNBREAKABLE VOW

Snow was swirling against the icy windows once more; Christmas was approaching fast. Hagrid had already single-handedly delivered the usual twelve Christmas trees for the Great Hall; garlands of holly and tinsel had been twisted around the banisters of the stairs; everlasting candles glowed from inside the helmets of suits of armor and great bunches of mistletoe had been hung at intervals along the corridors. Large groups of girls tended to converge underneath the mistletoe bunches every time Harry went past, which caused blockages in the corridors; fortunately, however, Harry's frequent nighttime wanderings had given him an unusually good knowledge of the castle's secret passageways, so that he was

able, without too much difficulty, to navigate mistletoe-free routes between classes.

Ron, who might once have found the necessity of these detours a cause for jealousy rather than hilarity, simply roared with laughter about it all. Although Harry much preferred this new laughing, joking Ron to the moody, aggressive model he had been enduring for the last few weeks, the improved Ron came at a heavy price. Firstly, Harry had to put up with the frequent presence of Lavender Brown, who seemed to regard any moment that she was not kissing Ron as a moment wasted; and secondly, Harry found himself once more the best friend of two people who seemed unlikely ever to speak to each other again.

Ron, whose hands and forearms still bore scratches and cuts from Hermione's bird attack, was taking a defensive and resentful tone.

"She can't complain," he told Harry. "She snogged Krum. So she's found out someone wants to snog me too. Well, it's a free country. I haven't done anything wrong."

Harry did not answer, but pretended to be absorbed in the book they were supposed to have read before Charms next morning (*Quintessence: A Quest*). Determined as he was to remain friends with both Ron and Hermione, he was spending a lot of time with his mouth shut tight.

"I never promised Hermione anything," Ron mumbled. "I mean, all right, I was going to go to Slughorn's Christmas party with her, but she never said . . . just as friends . . . I'm a free agent. . . ."

Harry turned a page of *Quintessence*, aware that Ron was watching him. Ron's voice tailed away in mutters, barely audible

over the loud crackling of the fire, though Harry thought he caught the words “Krum” and “can’t complain” again.

Hermione’s schedule was so full that Harry could only talk to her properly in the evenings, when Ron was, in any case, so tightly wrapped around Lavender that he did not notice what Harry was doing. Hermione refused to sit in the common room while Ron was there, so Harry generally joined her in the library, which meant that their conversations were held in whispers.

“He’s at perfect liberty to kiss whomever he likes,” said Hermione, while the librarian, Madam Pince, prowled the shelves behind them. “I really couldn’t care less.”

She raised her quill and dotted an *i* so ferociously that she punctured a hole in her parchment. Harry said nothing. He thought his voice might soon vanish from lack of use. He bent a little lower over *Advanced Potion-Making* and continued to make notes on Everlasting Elixirs, occasionally pausing to decipher the Prince’s useful additions to Libatius Borage’s text.

“And incidentally,” said Hermione, after a few moments, “you need to be careful.”

“For the last time,” said Harry, speaking in a slightly hoarse whisper after three-quarters of an hour of silence, “I am not giving back this book, I’ve learned more from the Half-Blood Prince than Snape or Slughorn have taught me in —”

“I’m not talking about your stupid so-called Prince,” said Hermione, giving his book a nasty look as though it had been rude to her. “I’m talking about earlier. I went into the girls’ bathroom just before I came in here and there were about a dozen girls in there,

including that Romilda Vane, trying to decide how to slip you a love potion. They're all hoping they're going to get you to take them to Slughorn's party, and they all seem to have bought Fred and George's love potions, which I'm afraid to say probably work —"

"Why didn't you confiscate them then?" demanded Harry. It seemed extraordinary that Hermione's mania for upholding rules could have abandoned her at this crucial juncture.

"They didn't have the potions with them in the bathroom," said Hermione scornfully. "They were just discussing tactics. As I doubt whether even the *Half-Blood Prince*" — she gave the book another nasty look — "could dream up an antidote for a dozen different love potions at once, I'd just invite someone to go with you, that'll stop all the others thinking they've still got a chance. It's tomorrow night, they're getting desperate."

"There isn't anyone I want to invite," mumbled Harry, who was still trying not to think about Ginny any more than he could help, despite the fact that she kept cropping up in his dreams in ways that made him devoutly thankful that Ron could not perform Legilimency.

"Well, just be careful what you drink, because Romilda Vane looked like she meant business," said Hermione grimly.

She hitched up the long roll of parchment on which she was writing her Arithmancy essay and continued to scratch away with her quill. Harry watched her with his mind a long way away.

"Hang on a moment," he said slowly. "I thought Filch had banned anything bought at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes?"

"And when has anyone ever paid attention to what Filch has banned?" asked Hermione, still concentrating on her essay.

“But I thought all the owls were being searched. So how come these girls are able to bring love potions into school?”

“Fred and George send them disguised as perfumes and cough potions,” said Hermione. “It’s part of their Owl Order Service.”

“You know a lot about it.”

Hermione gave him the kind of nasty look she had just given his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*.

“It was all on the back of the bottles they showed Ginny and me in the summer,” she said coldly. “I don’t go around putting potions in people’s drinks . . . or pretending to, either, which is just as bad. . . .”

“Yeah, well, never mind that,” said Harry quickly. “The point is, Filch is being fooled, isn’t he? These girls are getting stuff into the school disguised as something else! So why couldn’t Malfoy have brought the necklace into the school — ?”

“Oh, Harry . . . not that again . . .”

“Come on, why not?” demanded Harry.

“Look,” sighed Hermione, “Secrecy Sensors detect jinxes, curses, and concealment charms, don’t they? They’re used to find Dark Magic and Dark objects. They’d have picked up a powerful curse, like the one on that necklace, within seconds. But something that’s just been put in the wrong bottle wouldn’t register — and anyway, love potions aren’t Dark or dangerous —”

“Easy for you to say,” muttered Harry, thinking of Romilda Vane.

“— so it would be down to Filch to realize it wasn’t a cough potion, and he’s not a very good wizard, I doubt he can tell one potion from —”

Hermione stopped dead; Harry had heard it too. Somebody had

moved close behind them among the dark bookshelves. They waited, and a moment later the vulturelike countenance of Madam Pince appeared around the corner, her sunken cheeks, her skin like parchment, and her long hooked nose illuminated unflatteringly by the lamp she was carrying.

“The library is now closed,” she said. “Mind you return anything you have borrowed to the correct — *what have you been doing to that book, you depraved boy?*”

“It isn’t the library’s, it’s mine!” said Harry hastily, snatching his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* off the table as she lunged at it with a clawlike hand.

“Despoiled!” she hissed. “Desecrated! Befouled!”

“It’s just a book that’s been written on!” said Harry, tugging it out of her grip.

She looked as though she might have a seizure; Hermione, who had hastily packed her things, grabbed Harry by the arm and frog-marched him away.

“She’ll ban you from the library if you’re not careful. Why did you have to bring that stupid book?”

“It’s not my fault she’s barking mad, Hermione. Or d’you think she overheard you being rude about Filch? I’ve always thought there might be something going on between them. . . .”

“Oh, ha ha . . .”

Enjoying the fact that they could speak normally again, they made their way along the deserted, lamp-lit corridors back to the common room, arguing about whether or not Filch and Madam Pince were secretly in love with each other.

“Baubles,” said Harry to the Fat Lady, this being the new, festive password.

“Same to you,” said the Fat Lady with a roguish grin, and she swung forward to admit them.

“Hi, Harry!” said Romilda Vane, the moment he had climbed through the portrait hole. “Fancy a gillywater?”

Hermione gave him a “what-did-I-tell-you?” look over her shoulder.

“No thanks,” said Harry quickly. “I don’t like it much.”

“Well, take these anyway,” said Romilda, thrusting a box into his hands. “Chocolate Cauldrons, they’ve got firewhisky in them. My gran sent them to me, but I don’t like them.”

“Oh — right — thanks a lot,” said Harry, who could not think what else to say. “Er — I’m just going over here with . . .”

He hurried off behind Hermione, his voice tailing away feebly.

“Told you,” said Hermione succinctly. “Sooner you ask someone, sooner they’ll all leave you alone and you can —”

But her face suddenly turned blank; she had just spotted Ron and Lavender, who were entwined in the same armchair.

“Well, good night, Harry,” said Hermione, though it was only seven o’clock in the evening, and she left for the girls’ dormitory without another word.

Harry went to bed comforting himself that there was only one more day of lessons to struggle through, plus Slughorn’s party, after which he and Ron would depart together for the Burrow. It now seemed impossible that Ron and Hermione would make up with each other before the holidays began, but perhaps, somehow, the break would

give them time to calm down, think better of their behavior. . . .

But his hopes were not high, and they sank still lower after enduring a Transfiguration lesson with them both next day. They had just embarked upon the immensely difficult topic of human Transfiguration; working in front of mirrors, they were supposed to be changing the color of their own eyebrows. Hermione laughed unkindly at Ron's disastrous first attempt, during which he somehow managed to give himself a spectacular handlebar mustache; Ron retaliated by doing a cruel but accurate impression of Hermione jumping up and down in her seat every time Professor McGonagall asked a question, which Lavender and Parvati found deeply amusing and which reduced Hermione to the verge of tears again. She raced out of the classroom on the bell, leaving half her things behind; Harry, deciding that her need was greater than Ron's just now, scooped up her remaining possessions and followed her.

He finally tracked her down as she emerged from a girls' bathroom on the floor below. She was accompanied by Luna Lovegood, who was patting her vaguely on the back.

"Oh, hello, Harry," said Luna. "Did you know one of your eyebrows is bright yellow?"

"Hi, Luna. Hermione, you left your stuff. . . ."

He held out her books.

"Oh yes," said Hermione in a choked voice, taking her things and turning away quickly to hide the fact that she was wiping her eyes on her pencil case. "Thank you, Harry. Well, I'd better get going. . . ."

And she hurried off, without giving Harry any time to offer words of comfort, though admittedly he could not think of any.

“She’s a bit upset,” said Luna. “I thought at first it was Moaning Myrtle in there, but it turned out to be Hermione. She said something about that Ron Weasley. . . .”

“Yeah, they’ve had a row,” said Harry.

“He says very funny things sometimes, doesn’t he?” said Luna, as they set off down the corridor together. “But he can be a bit unkind. I noticed that last year.”

“I s’pose,” said Harry. Luna was demonstrating her usual knack of speaking uncomfortable truths; he had never met anyone quite like her. “So have you had a good term?”

“Oh, it’s been all right,” said Luna. “A bit lonely without the D.A. Ginny’s been nice, though. She stopped two boys in our Transfiguration class calling me ‘Loony’ the other day —”

“How would you like to come to Slughorn’s party with me tonight?”

The words were out of Harry’s mouth before he could stop them; he heard himself say them as though it were a stranger speaking.

Luna turned her protuberant eyes upon him in surprise.

“Slughorn’s party? With you?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “We’re supposed to bring guests, so I thought you might like . . . I mean . . .” He was keen to make his intentions perfectly clear. “I mean, just as friends, you know. But if you don’t want to . . .”

He was already half hoping that she didn’t want to.

“Oh, no, I’d love to go with you as friends!” said Luna, beaming as he had never seen her beam before. “Nobody’s ever asked me to a party before, as a friend! Is that why you dyed your eyebrow, for the

party? Should I do mine too?"

"No," said Harry firmly, "that was a mistake. I'll get Hermione to put it right for me. So, I'll meet you in the entrance hall at eight o'clock then."

"AHA!" screamed a voice from overhead and both of them jumped; unnoticed by either of them, they had just passed right underneath Peeves, who was hanging upside down from a chandelier and grinning maliciously at them.

"Potty asked Loony to go to the party! Potty lurves Loony! Potty luvvvvvurves Loooooony!"

And he zoomed away, cackling and shrieking, "Potty loves Loony!"

"Nice to keep these things private," said Harry. And sure enough, in no time at all the whole school seemed to know that Harry Potter was taking Luna Lovegood to Slughorn's party.

"You could've taken *anyone*!" said Ron in disbelief over dinner. "*Anyone*! And you chose Loony Lovegood?"

"Don't call her that, Ron," snapped Ginny, pausing behind Harry on her way to join friends. "I'm really glad you're taking her, Harry, she's so excited."

And she moved on down the table to sit with Dean. Harry tried to feel pleased that Ginny was glad he was taking Luna to the party, but could not quite manage it. A long way along the table, Hermione was sitting alone, playing with her stew. Harry noticed Ron looking at her furtively.

"You could say sorry," suggested Harry bluntly.

"What, and get attacked by another flock of canaries?" muttered

Ron.

“What did you have to imitate her for?”

“She laughed at my mustache!”

“So did I, it was the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen.”

But Ron did not seem to have heard; Lavender had just arrived with Parvati. Squeezing herself in between Harry and Ron, Lavender flung her arms around Ron’s neck.

“Hi, Harry,” said Parvati who, like him, looked faintly embarrassed and bored by the behavior of their two friends.

“Hi,” said Harry. “How’re you? You’re staying at Hogwarts, then? I heard your parents wanted you to leave.”

“I managed to talk them out of it for the time being,” said Parvati. “That Katie thing really freaked them out, but as there hasn’t been anything since . . . Oh, hi, Hermione!”

Parvati positively beamed. Harry could tell that she was feeling guilty for having laughed at Hermione in Transfiguration. He looked around and saw that Hermione was beaming back, if possible even more brightly. Girls were very strange sometimes.

“Hi, Parvati!” said Hermione, ignoring Ron and Lavender completely. “Are you going to Slughorn’s party tonight?”

“No invite,” said Parvati gloomily. “I’d love to go, though, it sounds like it’s going to be really good. . . . You’re going, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m meeting Cormac at eight, and we’re —”

There was a noise like a plunger being withdrawn from a blocked sink and Ron surfaced. Hermione acted as though she had not seen or heard anything.

“— we’re going up to the party together.”

“Cormac?” said Parvati. “Cormac McLaggen, you mean?”

“That’s right,” said Hermione sweetly. “The one who *almost*” — she put a great deal of emphasis on the word — “became Gryffindor Keeper.”

“Are you going out with him, then?” asked Parvati, wide-eyed.

“Oh — yes — didn’t you know?” said Hermione, with a most un-Hermione-ish giggle.

“No!” said Parvati, looking positively agog at this piece of gossip. “Wow, you like your Quidditch players, don’t you? First Krum, then McLaggen . . .”

“I like *really good* Quidditch players,” Hermione corrected her, still smiling. “Well, see you . . . Got to go and get ready for the party. . . .”

She left. At once Lavender and Parvati put their heads together to discuss this new development, with everything they had ever heard about McLaggen, and all they had ever guessed about Hermione. Ron looked strangely blank and said nothing. Harry was left to ponder in silence the depths to which girls would sink to get revenge.

When he arrived in the entrance hall at eight o’clock that night, he found an unusually large number of girls lurking there, all of whom seemed to be staring at him resentfully as he approached Luna. She was wearing a set of spangled silver robes that were attracting a certain amount of giggles from the onlookers, but otherwise she looked quite nice. Harry was glad, in any case, that she had left off her radish earrings, her butterbeer cork necklace, and her Spectrespecs.

“Hi,” he said. “Shall we get going then?”

“Oh yes,” she said happily. “Where is the party?”

“Slughorn’s office,” said Harry, leading her up the marble staircase away from all the staring and muttering. “Did you hear, there’s supposed to be a vampire coming?”

“Rufus Scrimgeour?” asked Luna.

“I — what?” said Harry, disconcerted. “You mean the Minister of Magic?”

“Yes, he’s a vampire,” said Luna matter-of-factly. “Father wrote a very long article about it when Scrimgeour first took over from Cornelius Fudge, but he was forced not to publish by somebody from the Ministry. Obviously, they didn’t want the truth to get out!”

Harry, who thought it most unlikely that Rufus Scrimgeour was a vampire, but who was used to Luna repeating her father’s bizarre views as though they were fact, did not reply; they were already approaching Slughorn’s office and the sounds of laughter, music, and loud conversation were growing louder with every step they took.

Whether it had been built that way, or because he had used magical trickery to make it so, Slughorn’s office was much larger than the usual teacher’s study. The ceiling and walls had been draped with emerald, crimson, and gold hangings, so that it looked as though they were all inside a vast tent. The room was crowded and stuffy and bathed in the red light cast by an ornate golden lamp dangling from the center of the ceiling in which real fairies were fluttering, each a brilliant speck of light. Loud singing accompanied by what sounded like mandolins issued from a distant corner; a haze of pipe smoke hung over several elderly warlocks deep in conversation, and a

number of house-elves were negotiating their way squeakily through the forest of knees, obscured by the heavy silver platters of food they were bearing, so that they looked like little roving tables.

“Harry, m’boy!” boomed Slughorn, almost as soon as Harry and Luna had squeezed in through the door. “Come in, come in, so many people I’d like you to meet!”

Slughorn was wearing a tasseled velvet hat to match his smoking jacket. Gripping Harry’s arm so tightly he might have been hoping to Disapparate with him, Slughorn led him purposefully into the party; Harry seized Luna’s hand and dragged her along with him.

“Harry, I’d like you to meet Eldred Worple, an old student of mine, author of *Blood Brothers: My Life Amongst the Vampires* — and, of course, his friend Sanguini.”

Worple, who was a small, stout, bespectacled man, grabbed Harry’s hand and shook it enthusiastically; the vampire Sanguini, who was tall and emaciated with dark shadows under his eyes, merely nodded. He looked rather bored. A gaggle of girls was standing close to him, looking curious and excited.

“Harry Potter, I am simply delighted!” said Worple, peering shortsightedly up into Harry’s face. “I was saying to Professor Slughorn only the other day, ‘*Where is the biography of Harry Potter for which we have all been waiting?*’”

“Er,” said Harry, “were you?”

“Just as modest as Horace described!” said Worple. “But seriously” — his manner changed; it became suddenly businesslike — “I would be delighted to write it myself — people are craving to know more about you, dear boy, craving! If you were prepared to

grant me a few interviews, say in four- or five-hour sessions, why, we could have the book finished within months. And all with very little effort on your part, I assure you — ask Sanguini here if it isn't quite — *Sanguini, stay here!*” added Worple, suddenly stern, for the vampire had been edging toward the nearby group of girls, a rather hungry look in his eye. “Here, have a pasty,” said Worple, seizing one from a passing elf and stuffing it into Sanguini's hand before turning his attention back to Harry.

“My dear boy, the gold you could make, you have no idea —”

“I'm definitely not interested,” said Harry firmly, “and I've just seen a friend of mine, sorry.”

He pulled Luna after him into the crowd; he had indeed just seen a long mane of brown hair disappear between what looked like two members of the Weird Sisters.

“Hermione! *Hermione!*”

“Harry! There you are, thank goodness! Hi, Luna!”

“What's happened to you?” asked Harry, for Hermione looked distinctly disheveled, rather as though she had just fought her way out of a thicket of Devil's Snare.

“Oh, I've just escaped — I mean, I've just left Cormac,” she said. “Under the mistletoe,” she added in explanation, as Harry continued to look questioningly at her.

“Serves you right for coming with him,” he told her severely.

“I thought he'd annoy Ron most,” said Hermione dispassionately. “I debated for a while about Zacharias Smith, but I thought, on the whole —”

“*You considered Smith?*” said Harry, revolted.

“Yes, I did, and I’m starting to wish I’d chosen him, McLaggen makes Grawp look a gentleman. Let’s go this way, we’ll be able to see him coming, he’s so tall. . . .”

The three of them made their way over to the other side of the room, scooping up goblets of mead on the way, realizing too late that Professor Trelawney was standing there alone.

“Hello,” said Luna politely to Professor Trelawney.

“Good evening, my dear,” said Professor Trelawney, focusing upon Luna with some difficulty. Harry could smell cooking sherry again. “I haven’t seen you in my classes lately. . . .”

“No, I’ve got Firenze this year,” said Luna.

“Oh, of course,” said Professor Trelawney with an angry, drunken titter. “Or Dobbin, as I prefer to think of him. You would have thought, would you not, that now I am returned to the school Professor Dumbledore might have got rid of the horse? But no . . . we share classes. . . . It’s an insult, frankly, an insult. Do you know . . .”

Professor Trelawney seemed too tipsy to have recognized Harry. Under cover of her furious criticisms of Firenze, Harry drew closer to Hermione and said, “Let’s get something straight. Are you planning to tell Ron that you interfered at Keeper tryouts?”

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “Do you really think I’d stoop that low?”

Harry looked at her shrewdly. “Hermione, if you can ask out McLaggen —”

“There’s a difference,” said Hermione with dignity. “I’ve got no plans to tell Ron anything about what might, or might not, have happened at Keeper tryouts.”

“Good,” said Harry fervently. “Because he’ll just fall apart again, and we’ll lose the next match —”

“Quidditch!” said Hermione angrily. “Is that all boys care about? Cormac hasn’t asked me one single question about myself, no, I’ve just been treated to ‘A Hundred Great Saves Made by Cormac McLaggen’ nonstop ever since — oh no, here he comes!”

She moved so fast it was as though she had Disapparated; one moment she was there, the next, she had squeezed between two guffawing witches and vanished.

“Seen Hermione?” asked McLaggen, forcing his way through the throng a minute later.

“No, sorry,” said Harry, and he turned quickly to join in Luna’s conversation, forgetting for a split second to whom she was talking.

“Harry Potter!” said Professor Trelawney in deep, vibrant tones, noticing him for the first time.

“Oh, hello,” said Harry unenthusiastically.

“My dear boy!” she said in a very carrying whisper. “The rumors! The stories! ‘The Chosen One’! Of course, I have known for a very long time. . . . The omens were never good, Harry. . . . But why have you not returned to Divination? For you, of all people, the subject is of the utmost importance!”

“Ah, Sybill, we all think our subject’s most important!” said a loud voice, and Slughorn appeared at Professor Trelawney’s other side, his face very red, his velvet hat a little askew, a glass of mead in one hand and an enormous mince pie in the other. “But I don’t think I’ve ever known such a natural at Potions!” said Slughorn, regarding Harry with a fond, if bloodshot, eye. “Instinctive, you know — like

his mother! I've only ever taught a few with this kind of ability, I can tell you that, Sybill — why even Severus —”

And to Harry's horror, Slughorn threw out an arm and seemed to scoop Snape out of thin air toward them.

“Stop skulking and come and join us, Severus!” hiccuped Slughorn happily. “I was just talking about Harry's exceptional potion-making! Some credit must go to you, of course, you taught him for five years!”

Trapped, with Slughorn's arm around his shoulders, Snape looked down his hooked nose at Harry, his black eyes narrowed.

“Funny, I never had the impression that I managed to teach Potter anything at all.”

“Well, then, it's natural ability!” shouted Slughorn. “You should have seen what he gave me, first lesson, Draught of Living Death — never had a student produce finer on a first attempt, I don't think even you, Severus —”

“Really?” said Snape quietly, his eyes still boring into Harry, who felt a certain disquiet. The last thing he wanted was for Snape to start investigating the source of his newfound brilliance at Potions.

“Remind me what other subjects you're taking, Harry?” asked Slughorn.

“Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology . . .”

“All the subjects required, in short, for an Auror,” said Snape, with the faintest sneer.

“Yeah, well, that's what I'd like to do,” said Harry defiantly.

“And a great one you'll make too!” boomed Slughorn.

“I don't think you should be an Auror, Harry,” said Luna

unexpectedly. Everybody looked at her. “The Aurors are part of the Rotfang Conspiracy, I thought everyone knew that. They’re working to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using a combination of Dark Magic and gum disease.”

Harry inhaled half his mead up his nose as he started to laugh. Really, it had been worth bringing Luna just for this. Emerging from his goblet, coughing, sopping wet but still grinning, he saw something calculated to raise his spirits even higher: Draco Malfoy being dragged by the ear toward them by Argus Filch.

“Professor Slughorn,” wheezed Filch, his jowls aquiver and the maniacal light of mischief-detection in his bulging eyes, “I discovered this boy lurking in an upstairs corridor. He claims to have been invited to your party and to have been delayed in setting out. Did you issue him with an invitation?”

Malfoy pulled himself free of Filch’s grip, looking furious.

“All right, I wasn’t invited!” he said angrily. “I was trying to gate-crash, happy?”

“No, I’m not!” said Filch, a statement at complete odds with the glee on his face. “You’re in trouble, you are! Didn’t the headmaster say that nighttime prowling’s out, unless you’ve got permission, didn’t he, eh?”

“That’s all right, Argus, that’s all right,” said Slughorn, waving a hand. “It’s Christmas, and it’s not a crime to want to come to a party. Just this once, we’ll forget any punishment; you may stay, Draco.”

Filch’s expression of outraged disappointment was perfectly predictable; but why, Harry wondered, watching him, did Malfoy look almost equally unhappy? And why was Snape looking at Malfoy

as though both angry and . . . was it possible? . . . a little afraid?

But almost before Harry had registered what he had seen, Filch had turned and shuffled away, muttering under his breath; Malfoy had composed his face into a smile and was thanking Slughorn for his generosity, and Snape's face was smoothly inscrutable again.

"It's nothing, nothing," said Slughorn, waving away Malfoy's thanks. "I did know your grandfather, after all. . . ."

"He always spoke very highly of you, sir," said Malfoy quickly. "Said you were the best potion-maker he'd ever known. . . ."

Harry stared at Malfoy. It was not the sucking-up that intrigued him; he had watched Malfoy do that to Snape for a long time. It was the fact that Malfoy did, after all, look a little ill. This was the first time he had seen Malfoy close up for ages; he now saw that Malfoy had dark shadows under his eyes and a distinctly grayish tinge to his skin.

"I'd like a word with you, Draco," said Snape suddenly.

"Oh, now, Severus," said Slughorn, hiccuping again, "it's Christmas, don't be too hard —"

"I'm his Head of House, and I shall decide how hard, or otherwise, to be," said Snape curtly. "Follow me, Draco."

They left, Snape leading the way, Malfoy looking resentful. Harry stood there for a moment, irresolute, then said, "I'll be back in a bit, Luna — er — bathroom."

"All right," she said cheerfully, and he thought he heard her, as he hurried off into the crowd, resume the subject of the Rotfang Conspiracy with Professor Trelawney, who seemed sincerely interested.

It was easy, once out of the party, to pull his Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket and throw it over himself, for the corridor was quite deserted. What was more difficult was finding Snape and Malfoy. Harry ran down the corridor, the noise of his feet masked by the music and loud talk still issuing from Slughorn's office behind him. Perhaps Snape had taken Malfoy to his office in the dungeons . . . or perhaps he was escorting him back to the Slytherin common room. . . . Harry pressed his ear against door after door as he dashed down the corridor until, with a great jolt of excitement, he crouched down to the keyhole of the last classroom in the corridor and heard voices.

“ . . . cannot afford mistakes, Draco, because if you are expelled — ”

“I didn't have anything to do with it, all right?”

“I hope you are telling the truth, because it was both clumsy and foolish. Already you are suspected of having a hand in it.”

“Who suspects me?” said Malfoy angrily. “For the last time, I didn't do it, okay? That Bell girl must've had an enemy no one knows about — don't look at me like that! I know what you're doing, I'm not stupid, but it won't work — I can stop you!”

There was a pause and then Snape said quietly, “Ah . . . Aunt Bellatrix has been teaching you Occlumency, I see. What thoughts are you trying to conceal from your master, Draco?”

“I'm not trying to conceal anything from *him*, I just don't want *you* butting in!”

Harry pressed his ear still more closely against the keyhole. . . . What had happened to make Malfoy speak to Snape like this —

Snape, toward whom he had always shown respect, even liking?

“So that is why you have been avoiding me this term? You have feared my interference? You realize that, had anybody else failed to come to my office when I had told them repeatedly to be there, Draco —”

“So put me in detention! Report me to Dumbledore!” jeered Malfoy.

There was another pause. Then Snape said, “You know perfectly well that I do not wish to do either of those things.”

“You’d better stop telling me to come to your office then!”

“Listen to me,” said Snape, his voice so low now that Harry had to push his ear very hard against the keyhole to hear. “I am trying to help you. I swore to your mother I would protect you. I made the Unbreakable Vow, Draco —”

“Looks like you’ll have to break it, then, because I don’t need your protection! It’s my job, he gave it to me and I’m doing it, I’ve got a plan and it’s going to work, it’s just taking a bit longer than I thought it would!”

“What is your plan?”

“It’s none of your business!”

“If you tell me what you are trying to do, I can assist you —”

“I’ve got all the assistance I need, thanks, I’m not alone!”

“You were certainly alone tonight, which was foolish in the extreme, wandering the corridors without lookouts or backup, these are elementary mistakes —”

“I would’ve had Crabbe and Goyle with me if you hadn’t put them in detention!”

“Keep your voice down!” spat Snape, for Malfoy’s voice had risen excitedly. “If your friends Crabbe and Goyle intend to pass their Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. this time around, they will need to work a little harder than they are doing at pres —”

“What does it matter?” said Malfoy. “Defense Against the Dark Arts — it’s all just a joke, isn’t it, an act? Like any of us need protecting against the Dark Arts —”

“It is an act that is crucial to success, Draco!” said Snape. “Where do you think I would have been all these years, if I had not known how to act? Now listen to me! You are being incautious, wandering around at night, getting yourself caught, and if you are placing your reliance in assistants like Crabbe and Goyle —”

“They’re not the only ones, I’ve got other people on my side, better people!”

“Then why not confide in me, and I can —”

“I know what you’re up to! You want to steal my glory!”

There was another pause, then Snape said coldly, “You are speaking like a child. I quite understand that your father’s capture and imprisonment has upset you, but —”

Harry had barely a second’s warning; he heard Malfoy’s footsteps on the other side of the door and flung himself out of the way just as it burst open; Malfoy was striding away down the corridor, past the open door of Slughorn’s office, around the distant corner, and out of sight.

Hardly daring to breathe, Harry remained crouched down as Snape emerged slowly from the classroom. His expression unfathomable, he returned to the party. Harry remained on the floor, hidden beneath the

Cloak, his mind racing.

Die Onbreekbare Eed

Sneeu warrel weer teen die toegeysde vensters vas; Kersfees kom vinnig nader. Hagrid het reeds manalleen die gebruiklike twaalf Kersbome vir die Groot Saal afgelewer; kranse van steekpalmtakke en stringe silwerdrade is om die trapreling gedraai; ewigdurende kerse gloei agter die wapenrustings se helms en groot bosse mistel is elke paar tree in die gange opgehang. Elke keer dat Harry verbyloop, koek groepies meisies onder die mistelbosse saam en veroorsaak opeenhopings in die gange, maar danksy Harry se gereelde nagtelike omswerwinge ken hy die kasteel se geheime gange buitengewoon goed en kan hy sonder te veel moeite die roetes sonder mistel tussen klasse volg.

Ron sou eens op 'n tyd jaloers gewees het dat Harry sulke ompaaie moet vat, maar nou brul hy net van die lag daaroor. Harry verkies die nuwe, laggende Ron wat vol grappies is ver bo die buierige, aggressiewe Ron wat hy die afgelope paar weke moes verduur, maar hy moet ook 'n swaar prys daarvoor betaal. Eerstens moet Harry verlief neem met Lavender Brown, wat gereeld by hulle is en blykbaar elke oomblik wat sy Ron nie soen nie as 'n vermorsing beskou; en tweedens bevind Harry hom weer eens in die posisie dat hy tweemense wat waarskynlik nooit weer met mekaar gaan praat nie se beste vriend is.

Ron se hande en voorarms is nog vol krapmerke en snye ná Hermione se voëlaanval en hy slaan 'n verdedigende en verwytende houding in.

“Sy kan nie kla nie,” sê hy vir Harry. “Sy’t met Krum gevry. En nou’t sy uitgevind iemand wil met my ook vry. Wel, dis ’n vry land. Ek het niks verkeerds gedoen nie.”

Harry antwoord hom nie, maar maak of hy verdiep is in die boek wat hulle veronderstel is om voor môre se Towerdrankie-klas te lees (*Kwintessens: ’n Soektog*). Aangesien hy vasberade is om met sowel Ron as Hermione vriende te bly, bring hy deesdae baie tyd deur met sy mond styf toe.

“Ek het Hermione niks belowe nie,” mompel Ron. “Ek bedoel, oukei, ek sou saam met haar na Slughorn se Kerspartytjie toe gegaan het, maar sy’t nooit gesê ... net as vriende ... Ek behoort aan niemand nie ...”

Harry blaai om in *Kwintessens*, en is daarvan bewus dat Ron hom dophou. Ron se stem draal mompelend voort en is skaars hoorbaar bo die vuur wat hard knetter, hoewel Harry hom verbeel hy hoor weer die woorde “Krum” en “kan nie kla nie”.

Hermione se rooster is so vol dat Harry net saans, wanneer Ron in elk geval so aan Lavender vasklou dat hy nie agterkom wat Harry doen nie, ordentlik met haar kan praat. Hermione weier om in die geselskamer te sit wanneer Ron daar is; daarom gaan kuier Harry gewoonlik vir haar in die biblioteek, wat beteken hulle moet fluis-tergesprekke voer.

“Dit staan hom absoluut vry om te soen wie hy ook al wil,” sê Hermione terwyl die bibliotekaresse, Madame Pince, die rakke agter hulle patroleer. “Dit skeel my nie in die minste nie.”

Sy lig haar veerpen en sit só heftig ’n kolletjie op ’n “i” dat sy ’n gat in haar perkament druk. Harry sê niks. Hy dink sy gaan haar stem binnekort kwyt wees omdat sy dit skaars meer gebruik. Hy buig ’n bietjie laer oor *Gevorderde Towerkunsies* en hou aan notas maak oor Ewigdurende Eliksters terwyl hy elke nou en dan stop om die Prins se nuttige toevoegings tot Libatius Borage se teks te ont-syfer.

“En terloops,” sê Hermione ná ’n paar oomblikke, “jy moet versigtig wees.”

“Vir die laaste keer,” sê Harry in ’n fluisterstem wat effens hees is ná ’n driekwartier van stilte, “ek gaan hierdie boek nie teruggee nie. Ek het meer by die Halfbloed Prins geleer as wat Snape of Slughorn my ooit –”

“Ek praat nie van jou simpel sogenaamde Prins nie,” sê Hermione en gee sy boek ’n vuil kyk asof dit ongeskik met haar was, “ek praat van netnou. Ek is na die meisies se kleedkamer toe net voor ek hierheen gekom het en daar was omtrent ’n dosyn meisies daar, onder meer Romilda Vane, wat probeer besluit het hoe om vir jou ’n liefdesdrankie in te gee. Hulle hoop almal jy gaan een van hulle na Slughorn se partytjie toe neem en dit klink vir my hulle het almal Fred en George se liefdesdrankies gekoop, wat, ek bevrees is om te sê, heel moontlik werk –”

“Hoekom het jy dit dan nie by hulle afgevat nie?” wil Harry weet. Dis vreemd dat Hermione se manier om reëls te handhaaf haar op hierdie spesifieke tydstip in die steek gelaat het.

“Hulle het nie die liefdesdrankies by hulle in die kleedkamer gehad nie,” sê Hermione vererg. “Hulle het net taktiek bespreek. Aangesien ek twyfel of selfs die *Halfbloed Prins*,” en sy gee die boek weer ’n vuil kyk, “ ’n teenmiddel vir ’n dosyn verskillende liefdesdrankies tegelyk kon uitdink, sou ek vinnig iemand genooi het om saam met my te gaan as ek jy was – dan sal die ander nie meer dink hulle het ’n kans nie. Dis môreaand en hulle raak al desperaat.”

“Daar is niemand wat ek wil nooi nie,” mompel Harry, wat nog steeds probeer om nie meer as wat hy dit kan verhelp aan Ginny te dink nie, ondanks die feit dat sy aanhoudend in sy drome verskyn op maniere wat hom innig dankbaar maak dat Ron nie weet hoe Legilimensie werk nie.

“Wel, oppas net wat jy drink, want Romilda Vane het vasberade gelyk,” sê Hermione grimmig.

Sy trek die lang perkamentrol waarop sy haar Rekenmatiek-opstel skryf hoër op en hou aan krap met haar veerpen. Harry hou haar dop, maar sy gedagtes is ver weg.

“Wag ’n bietjie,” sê hy stadig. “Ek dog dan Filch het alles wat deur Weasleys se Wonderpoetse verkoop word, verbied?”

“En wie het hulle nou al ooit daaraan gesteur as Filch iets verbied?” vra Hermione terwyl sy nog steeds op haar opstel konsentreer.

“Maar ek dog al die uile word deursoek? So hoe het daai meisies die liefdesdrankies by die skool ingekry?”

“Fred en George het dit vir hulle gestuur, vermom as parfuum en hoesdrankies,” sê Hermione. “Dis deel van hulle Uilbesteldiens.”

“Jy weet baie daaromtrent.”

Hermione gee vir hom dieselfde vuil kyk wat sy vir sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* gegee het.

“Dit was alles agterop die bottels wat hulle dié somer vir my en Ginny gewys het,” sê sy kil. “Ek loop nie rond en gooi doepas in mense se drankies ... of maak asof ek dit doen nie, wat net so erg is ...”

“Ja, oukei, vergeet nou daarvan,” sê Harry vinnig. “Feit bly staan, Filch word vir die gek gehou. Daardie meisies kry goed wat as iets anders vermom is by die skool ingesmokkel! So hoekom sou Malfoy die halssnoer nie by die skool kon inkry nie?”

“Ag nee, Harry ... nie weer daai ou storie nie ...”

“Komaan, hoekom nie?” wil Harry weet.

“Luister,” sug Hermione, “Soeksensors spoor doepas, vloeke en verbloemingstalismans op, nie waar nie? Die goed snuffel enige Donker toorkuns of Donker voorwerpe uit. Hulle sal ’n sterk vloek

soos daardie halssnoer s'n binne sekondes optel. Maar iets wat net in die verkeerde bottel gesit is, sal nie registreer nie – en in elk geval, liefdesdrankies is nie Donker of gevaarlik nie –

“Maklik vir jou om te sê,” brom Harry en dink aan Romilda Vane.

“– Filch sal dus moet agterkom dis nie 'n hoedrankie nie en hy's nie 'n goeie towenaar nie; ek twyfel of hy een towerdrankie van 'n ander kan onderskei en –”

Hermione bly skielik stil; Harry het dit ook gehoor. Iemand het reg agter hulle tussen die donker boekrakke beweeg. Hulle wag en 'n oomblik later verskyn Madame Pince se aasvoëlgesig om die hoek. Haar wange is hol, haar vel lyk soos perkament en die lamp wat sy dra, belig haar lang haakneus onvleiend.

“Die biblioteek is nou gesluit,” sê sy. “Besorg enigiets wat julle uitgeneem het terug aan die regte – Wat het jy met daardie boek aangevang, jou sleg kind?”

“Dis nie die biblioteek s'n nie; dis myne!” sê Harry haastig en pluk sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* vinnig weg van haar hande wat soos kloue daarna gryp.

“Geplunder!” sis sy. “Geskend! Bevuil!”

“Dis net 'n boek waarin daar geskryf is!” sê Harry en trek die boek uit haar greep.

Dit lyk of sy 'n oorval gaan kry; Hermione, wat haar goed in-tussen haastig ingepak het, gryp Harry aan die arm en sleepdra hom daar weg.

“Sy sal jou die biblioteek belet as jy nie oppas nie. Hoekom het jy daai simpel boek saamgebring?”

“Dis nie my skuld dat sy stapelgek is nie, Hermione. Of dink jy sy't gehoor watse lelike goed jy van Filch sê? Ek het nog altyd gedink daar's dalk iets tussen hulle twee ...”

“O, ha, ha ...”

Hulle geniet dit om weer normaal te kan praat en stap met die verlate, lampverligte gange langs terug na die geselskamer terwyl hulle stry oor of Filch en Madame Pince heimlik op mekaar verlief is of nie.

“Tierlantyntjies,” gee Harry vir die Vet Vrou hul nuwe wagwoord vir die feesgety.

“Joune ook,” sê die Vet Vrou met 'n ondeunde glimlag en swaai vorentoe om hulle in te laat.

“Haai, Harry!” sê Romilda Vane die oomblik toe hy deur die portretopening geklim het. “Lus vir Angelierwater?” Hermione gee vir hom 'n “Wat-het-ek-jou-gesê?”-kyk oor haar skouer.

“Nee dankie,” sê Harry vinnig. “Ek hou nie eintlik daarvan nie.”

“Maar vat dit vir jou,” sê Romilda en stop ’n boks in sy hand. “Dis Sjekoketels; hulle’t Vuurwhisky in. My ouma het dit vir my gestuur, maar ek hou nie daarvan nie.”

“O – ek sien – baie dankie,” sê Harry, wat nie kan dink wat anders om te sê nie. “E – ek is net gou op pad om ...”

Hy sit Hermione vinnig agterna en sy stem sterf weg.

“Ek het jou gesê,” sê Hermione saaklik. “Hoe gouer jy iemand vra, hoe gouer sal hulle jou uitlos en –”

Maar haar gesig word skielik uitdrukkingloos; sy het so pas vir Ron en Lavender gesien wat inmekaar gevleg op dieselfde leunstoel sit.

“Wel, goeienag, Harry,” sê Hermione al is dit net sewe-uur in die aand en sy verdwyn sonder ’n woord verder na die meisies se slaapsaal toe.

Harry gaan bed toe en troos homself aan die feit dat hy nog net een dag van klasse plus Slughorn se partytjie moet oorleef voordat hy en Ron saam na Die Konynenes vertrek. Dit lyk nou vir hom onmoontlik dat Ron en Hermione voor die vakansie weer vrede sal maak, maar miskien sal die tyd weg van mekaar hulle op die een of ander manier laat afkoel en hulle oor hul gedrag laat nadink...

Maar hy het nie veel hoop nie, en selfs nog minder toe hy die volgende dag ’n Transfigurasieklas saam met hulle twee moet deurworstel. Hulle het so pas begin met die uiters moeilike onderwerp van menslike transfigurasie; hulle werk voor spieëls en is veronderstel om hul eie wenkbroue se kleur te verander. Hermione lag spottend vir Ron se eerste rampspoedige poging waartydens hy dit regkry om vir homself ’n welige weglêsnor te gee. Ron neem weerwraak deur ’n getroue weergawe te gee van hoe Hermione op en af in haar sitplek wip elke keer dat professor McGonagall ’n vraag vra; Lavender en Parvati vind dit hoogs amusant en Hermione is weer op die rand van trane. Toe die klok lui, storm sy by die klas uit en los die helfte van haar goed net daar; Harry besluit sy het hom nou nodiger as Ron en tel dit op en volg haar.

Hy kry haar uiteindelik een verdieping laer toe sy by die meisies se kleedkamer uitkom. Luna Lovegood is by haar en klop haar ingedagte op die rug.

“O hallo, Harry,” sê Luna. “Het jy geweet een van jou wenkbroue is heldergeel?”

“Haai, Luna. Hermione, jy’t jou goed in die klas gelos ...”

Hy hou die boeke na haar toe uit.

“O ja,” sê Hermione met ’n gesmoorde stem. Sy vat haar goed en

draai vinnig weg sodat Harry nie moet sien sy vee haar oë teen haar veerpensakke af nie. “Dankie, Harry. Wel, ek moet loop ...”

En sy gee haastig pad sonder om Harry kans te gee om iets te sê om haar te troos, hoewel hy weliswaar nie aan enigiets kan dink nie.

“Sy’s ’n bietjie ontsteld,” sê Luna. “Ek dog eers dis Myrtle Martelgat daar binne, maar toe vind ek uit dis Hermione. Sy’t iets van daai Ron Weasley gesê ...”

“Ja, hulle het gestry,” sê Harry.

“Hy sê partykeer baie snaakse goed, nè?” sê Luna terwyl hulle saam die gang af stap. “Maar hy kan ook ’n bietjie geniepsig wees. Ek het dit laas jaar agtergekom.”

“Seker,” sê Harry. Luna wys weer eens sy skroom nie om die waarheid te praat nie, al is dit ook hoe ongemaklik; hy het nog nooit voorheen iemand soos sy ontmoet nie. “Was dit vir jou ’n lekker kwartaal?”

“O, dit was oukei,” sê Luna. “’n Bietjie eensaam sonder die DS. Maar Ginny was gaaf met my. Nou die dag het sy twee seuns in ons Transfigurasieklas ingevlieg toe hulle sê ek is met die maan gepla en my ‘Mania’ noem –”

“Is jy lus om vanaand saam met my na Slughorn se partytjie toe te kom?”

Die woorde is by Harry se mond uit voor hy hulle kan keer; hy hoor homself dit sê asof dit ’n vreemdeling is wat praat.

Luna se groot oë draai verbaas na hom.

“Slughorn se partytjie? Saam met jou?”

“Jip,” sê Harry. “Ons is veronderstel om iemand saam te bring en toe het ek gewonder of jy lus is ... ek bedoel ...” Hy wil doodseker maak sy verstaan hom nie verkeerd nie. “Ek bedoel, net as vriende, weet jy. Maar as jy nie wil nie ...”

Hy hoop al klaar sy wil nie.

“O nee, ek sal baie graag saam met jou wil gaan, net as vriende!” sê Luna en straal soos hy haar nog nooit gesien straal het nie. “Niemand het my nog ooit na ’n partytjie toe uitgevra nie, nie eens net as ’n vriend nie! Is dit hoekom jy een wenkbrou gekleur het – vir die partytjie? Moet ek myne ook kleur?”

“Nee,” sê Harry beslis, “dit was ’n fout. Ek sal dat Hermione dit vir my regmaak. Dan sien ek jou agtuur in die Ingangsportaal.”

“AHA!” skree ’n stem van bo en hulle al twee wip van die skrik; hulle het sonder dat hulle dit agterkom reg onder Peeves verbygestap. Hy hang nou onderstebo aan ’n kroonkandelaar en grinnik leedvermakerig vir hulle.

“VersPottie vat vir Mania partytjie toe! VersPottie is mal oor Mania!”

VersPottie is mallllll oor Mania!" En hy zoem weg terwyl hy kekkel en kraai: "VersPottie is mal oor Mania!"

"Lekker dat mens sulke dinge privaat kan hou," sê Harry. En sowaar, dis nie lank nie of die hele skool weet blykbaar Harry Potter gaan vir Luna Lovegood na Slughorn se partytjie toe neem.

"Jy kon *enigiemand* gevat het!" sê Ron ongelowig met aandete. "*Enigiemand!* En jy kies vir Mania Lovegood!"

"Moenie haar só noem nie, Ron," sê Ginny skerp en kom staan agter Harry op pad om by haar vriende te gaan sit. "Ek's rêrig bly jy vat haar, Harry; sy's so opgewonde."

En sy beweeg verder met die tafel af en gaan sit by Dean. Harry probeer bly wees dat Ginny bly is dat hy Luna na die partytjie toe gaan vat, maar hy kry dit nie heeltemal reg nie. 'n Hele ent verder aan tafel sit Hermione alleen en speel met haar bredie. Harry merk op hoe Ron onderlangs vir haar loer.

"Sê vir haar jy's jammer," sê Harry op die man af.

"Wat, en dan word ek deur nóg 'n spul kanaries aangeval?" brom Ron.

"Vir wat het jy haar so nageaap?"

"Sy't vir my snor gelag!"

"Ek ook; dit was die snaaksste ding wat ek nog ooit gesien het."

Maar Ron hoor hom skaars; Lavender het so pas saam met Parvati opgedaag. Lavender druk haarself tussen Harry en Ron in en gooi haar arms om Ron se nek.

"Haai, Harry," sê Parvati, wat nes hy al ietwat verleë oor hul twee vriende se gedrag is en nou ook verveeld raak daarmee.

"Haai," sê Harry. "Hoe gaan dit? Gaan jy nou in Hogwarts bly? Ek het gehoor jou ouers wil jou hier wegvat."

"Ek het dit reggekry om hulle van plan te laat verander," sê Parvati. "Daai ding met Katie het hulle voorlopig verskriklik laat skrik, maar aangesien daar nog niks weer gebeur het nie ... O haai, Hermione!"

Parvati straal behoorlik. Harry kan sien sy voel skuldig omdat sy in die Transfigurasiemasieklas vir Hermione gelag het. Hy kyk om en sien Hermione glimlag selfs nog vriendeliker terug. Meisies is partykeer snaakse goed.

"Haai, Parvati!" sê Hermione en ignoreer Ron en Lavender totaal. "Gaan jy vanaand na Slughorn se partytjie toe?"

"Niemand het my genooi nie," sê Parvati teleurgesteld. "Ek sal baie graag wil gaan; dit klink of dit groot pret gaan wees ... Jy gaan mos, nè?"

"Ja, ek kry Cormac agtuur en ons –"

Daar is 'n geluid soos 'n suier wat uit 'n verstopte wasbak getrek word en Ron skrik op. Harry maak of hy niks gesien of gehoor het nie.

“– en ons gaan dan saam partytjie toe.”

“Cormac?” vra Parvati. “Jy bedoel Cormac McLaggen?”

“Dis reg,” sê Hermione liefies. “Die een wat *amper*,” en sy beklemtoon die woord nogal kwaai, “Gryffindor se Wagter was.”

“Gaan jy en hy dan uit?” vra Parvati met groot oë.

“O – ja – het jy nie geweet nie?” sê Hermione met 'n absoluut on-Hermione-agtige giggel.

“Nooit!” sê Parvati en lyk in ekstase oor hierdie brokkie skinder-nuus. “Wow, jy hou van jou Kwiddiekspelers, nè? Eers Krum en nou McLaggen ...”

“Ek hou van *regtig goeie* Kwiddiekspelers,” korrigeer Hermione haar en glimlag nog steeds. “Wel, sien jou ... Ek moet waai en gaan regmaak vir die partytjie ...”

Sy loop. Lavender en Parvati sit dadelik koppe bymekaar om hierdie nuwe verwikkeling te bespreek, en dan alles wat hulle nog ooit van McLaggen gehoor het, en dan alles wat hulle nog ooit van Hermione vermoed het. Ron lyk vreemd afwesig en sê niks. Harry dink in stilte na oor die dieptes waartoe meisies sal daal om wraak te neem.

Toe hy agtuur daardie aand in die Ingangsportaal opdaag, sluip daar ongewoon baie meisies rond en dit lyk of hulle hom almal verwytend aanstaar terwyl hy na Luna toe loop. Sy dra 'n silwer kleed vol blinkertjies wat die toeskouers laat giggel, maar afgesien daarvan lyk sy heel mooi. Harry is in elk geval bly sy dra nie haar radysoorbelle, haar Botterbierkurk-halssnoer en haar bril nie.

“Haai,” sê hy. “Sal ons gaan?”

“O ja,” sê sy vrolik. “Waar is die partytjie?”

“In Slughorn se kantoor,” sê Harry en lei haar met die marmer-trap op, weg van al die gestaar en gefluister. “Het jy gehoor daar kom glo 'n vampier ook?”

“Rufus Scrimgeour?” vra Luna.

“Ek – wat?” sê Harry onthuts. “Jy bedoel die Minister van Toewerkuns?”

“Ja, hy's 'n vampier,” sê Luna doodluiters. “My pa het 'n baie lang artikel daaroor geskryf net ná Scrimgeour by Cornelius Fudge oorgeneem het, maar iemand van die Ministerie het hom verbied om dit te plaas. Hulle wou natuurlik nie hê die waarheid moes uitkom nie!”

Harry dink dis hoogs onwaarskynlik dat Rufus Scrimgeour 'n vampier is, maar hy is al gewoond daaraan dat Luna haar pa se

bizarre opinies herhaal asof dit feite is en daarom reageer hy nie. Hulle is nou naby Slughorn se kantoor en die klank van gelag, musiek en 'n luidrugtige gepraat word harder met elke tree wat hulle gee.

Of dit só gebou is en of dit weer een van sy magiese kultoertjies is, weet niemand nie, maar Slughorn se kantoor is baie groter as die ander onderwysers s'n. Die plafon en mure is met smaraggroen, karmosyn en goue behangsels gedrapeer sodat dit lyk of hulle in 'n ontsaglike groot tent is. Die vertrek is oorvol en bedompig en word gebaai in die rooi lig afkomstig van 'n swierige goue lamp wat in die middel van die plafon hang. Daar fladder regte feetjies rond, elkeen 'n glinsterende ligspikkel. Uit een hoek kom daar 'n harde gesing onder begeleiding van wat na mandoliene klink, 'n waas van pyprook hang oor etlike bejaarde towenaars wat diep in gesprek verkeer, en 'n hele paar huiselwe vleg hul pad oop deur 'n woud van knieë: hulle verdwyn agter die swaar silwer skinkborde kos wat hulle dra, sodat dit lyk of die vertrek vol swewende tafels is.

"Harry, ou seun!" basuin Slughorn dit uit omtrent die oomblik dat Harry en Luna by die deur inbeur. "Kom in, kom in; hier's soveel mense aan wie ek jou wil voorstel!"

Slughorn dra 'n fluweelhoed met tassels wat by sy fluweelbaadjie pas. Hy gryp Harry se arm so stewig vas dat dit voel of hy met hom wil disappareer, maar Slughorn lei hom doelgerig tussen die mense in; Harry gryp Luna se hand en sleep haar agter hom aan.

"Harry, ontmoet Eldred Worple, 'n gewese student van my, die skrywer van *Bloedbroers: My Lewe tussen Vampiere* – en dis natuurlik sy vriend, Sanguini."

Worple, 'n klein bebrilde mannetjie, gryp Harry se hand en skud dit entoesiasties; die vampier Sanguini, wat lank en uitgeteer is en donker skadu's onder sy oë het, knik net. Hy lyk taamlik verveeld. 'n Swerm meisies omring en bekyk hom nuuskierig en opgewonde.

"Harry Potter, baie bly om jou te ontmoet!" sê Worple en tuur bysiende op na Harry se gesig. "Ek het juis nou die dag vir professor Slughorn gesê: Waar is Harry Potter se biografie? Ons wag nou al almal hōe lank daarvoor!"

"E," sê Harry, "regtig?"

"Net so beskeie soos wat Horace jou beskryf het!" sê Worple. "Maar ernstig nou –" en hy verander skielik in 'n sakeman, "ek sal verheug wees om dit self te skryf – mense smag om meer van jou te hoor, ou seun, hulle smag daarna! As jy bereid is om 'n paar onderhoude aan my toe te staan, kom ons sê vier- of vyfuursessies, dan kan ons die boek binne 'n paar maande afhandel. En dit gaan nie

veel moeite van jou verg nie, ek verseker jou – vra vir Sanguini hier, hy sal beaam dat – *Sanguini, bly hier!*” voeg Worple skielik streng by, want die vampier probeer met ’n honger kyk in sy oë ongemerk na die groep meisies daar naby wegsloop. “Hier, eet ’n tertjie,” sê Worple. Hy gryp een by ’n elf wat verbyloop en stop dit in Sanguini se hand voor hy sy aandag weer by Harry bepaal.

“My liewe seun, jy het nie ’n benul hoeveel goud jy kan maak nie –”

“Ek stel definitief nie belang nie,” sê Harry beslis, “en ek het nou net ’n vriendin van my gesien. Verskoon my.”

Hy trek Luna agter hom aan tussen die mense in; hy het inderdaad ’n lang bos bruin hare sien verdwyn tussen wat soos twee lede van die Skikgodinne lyk.

“Hermione! *Hermione!*”

“Harry! Hier is jy; dankie tog! Haai, Luna!”

“Wat het jou oorgekom?” vra Harry, want Hermione se hare en klere is so deurmekaar asof sy nou net haar pad by ruie duiwelkerwels moes uitgeg.

“O, ek het nou net ontsnap – ek bedoel, ek het nou net weggekom van Cormac af,” sê sy. “Onder die mistel,” voeg sy ter verduideliking by toe Harry haar nog steeds vraend aankyk.

“Dit sal jou leer om saam met hom te kom,” sê hy streng vir haar.

“Ek het gedink dit sal Ron die kwaadste maak,” sê Hermione emosieloos. “Ek het eers vir Zacharias Smith oorweeg, maar toe besluit ek, in die geheel gesien –”

“*Jy het Smith oorweeg?*” sê Harry gewalg.

“Ja, ek het, en ek begin wens ek het hom gekies, want McLaggen laat Ghrop soos ’n gentleman lyk. Kom ons gaan hierlangs, dan kan ons hom sien aankom; hy’s so lank ...”

Die drie van hulle baan hul weg na die ander kant van die vertrek, kry onderweg vir hulle elkeen ’n beker heuningbier en besef te laat dat professor Trelawney alleen daar staan.

“Hallo,” groet Luna professor Trelawney beleefd.

“Goeienaand, skat,” sê professor Trelawney en fokus met moeite op Luna. Harry ruik weer die kooksjerrie. “Ek het jou nie onlangs in een van my klasse gesien nie ...”

“Nee, ek is vanjaar by Firenze,” sê Luna.

“O, natuurlik,” sê professor Trelawney en giggel vies en besope. “Of Karperd, soos wat ek verkies om aan hom te dink. Mens sou dink, sou jy nie, nou dat ek terug by die skool is, sal professor Dumbledore van daardie perd ontslae raak. Maar nee ... ons deel klasse ... Dis ’n belediging, uit en uit ’n belediging. Het jy geweet ...”

Professor Trelawney is blykbaar te aangeklam om Harry te herken. Terwyl sy teen Firenze uitvaar, trek Harry Hermione eenkant toe en sê: "Sê my net een ding. Is jy van plan om vir Ron te sê jy't ingemeng met die Wagterproewe?"

Hermione lig haar wenkbroue.

"Dink jy nou regtig ek sal so laag daal?"

Harry kyk haar uitgeslae aan.

"Hermione, as jy McLaggen kan nooi, dan –"

"Daar's 'n verskil," sê Hermione waardig. "Ek's nie van plan om vir Ron enigiets te vertel van wat dalk of dalk nie met die Wagterproewe gebeur het nie."

"Goed so," sê Harry vurig, "want anders gaan hy weer inkonk en dan verloor ons die volgende wedstryd –"

"Kwiddiek!" sê Hermione vies. "Is dit al waarvoor ouens omgee? Cormac het my nie een enkele vraag oor myself gevra nie; ek moet net heelaand luister na 'n nimmereindigende relaas van 'n Honderd Doelskote Meesterlik Gestuit deur Cormac McLaggen en – o nee, hier kom hy!"

Sy beweeg so vinnig dat dit lyk of sy disappareer; een oomblik is sy nog daar en die volgende oomblik het sy tussen twee luidrugtige hekse ingedruk en verdwyn.

"Het jy vir Hermione gesien?" vra McLaggen, wat die mense opsy stoot om by Harry uit te kom.

"Nee, jammer," sê Harry en draai vinnig na Luna toe; hy het vir 'n sekonde vergeet met wie sy gesels.

"Harry Potter!" sê professor Trelawney in 'n diep, trillende stem, want sy merk hom nou vir die eerste keer op.

"O, hallo," sê Harry onentoesiasties.

"My liewe seun!" sê sy in 'n fluisterstem wat almal kan hoor. "Die gerugte! Die stories! Die Uitverkorene! Ek weet natuurlik reeds lankal ... Die voorbodes was altyd onheilspellend, Harry ... Maar hoekom doen jy nie meer Voorspellings nie? Vir jou van alle mense is die vak van die uiterste belang!"

"Ag, Sybill, ons dink almal ons vak is die belangrikste!" sê 'n harde stem en Slughorn verskyn aan professor Trelawney se ander kant; sy gesig is baie rooi en sy fluweelhoed sit effens skeef; daar is 'n glas heuningbier in een hand en 'n enorme vleispastei in die ander een. "Maar ek dink nie ek het al ooit iemand teëgekom met so 'n natuurlike aanleg vir Towerdrankies nie!" sê Slughorn en kyk Harry met liefderike hoewel bloedbelope oë aan. "Instinktief, weet jy – nes sy ma! Ek het nog net 'n paar studente met sulke vermoëns gehad, dit verseker ek jou, Sybill – selfs Severus –"

En tot Harry se ontsteltenis skiët Slughorn se arm uit en trek hy Snape asof uit die niet na hulle toe.

“Hou op wegkruip en kom sluit by ons aan, Severus!” sê Slughorn en hik vrolik. “Ek praat nou juis hier oor Harry se buitengewone talent vir Towerdrankies! Jy verdien natuurlik ook eervolle vermelding, aangesien jy die afgelope vyf jaar sy onderwyser was!”

Slughorn se arm is stewig om Snape se skouers en hy kan nie wegkom nie. Hy kyk oor sy haakneus af na Harry en sy swart oë vernou.

“Vreemd genoeg het ek nooit die indruk gekry dat ek Potter enigiets hoegenaamd kon leer nie.”

“Wel, dan is dit net ’n natuurlike aanleg!” kondig Slughorn aan. “Jy moes sien watter Drankie van Lewende Dood hy tydens my eerste les gebrou het – geen student het nog ooit met so ’n voortreflike eerste poging vorendag gekom nie, ek dink selfs nie eens jy nie, Severus –”

“Werklik?” sê Snape sag en sy oë deurboor Harry, wat al hoe ongemakliker begin voel. Die laaste ding wat hy wil hê, is dat Snape die bron van sy nuutgevonde briljantheid moet begin ondersoek.

“Herinner my watter ander vakke jy neem, Harry?” vra Slughorn.

“Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste, Towerspreuke, Transfigurasie, Kruiekunde ...”

“Kortom, al die vakke wat jy nodig het om ’n Auror te kan word,” sê Snape met ’n suggestie van spot.

“Ja, wel, dis wat ek graag wil word,” se Harry uitdagend.

“En jy sal ’n briljante een wees!” bulder Slughorn.

“Ek dink nie jy moet ’n Auror word nie, Harry,” sê Luna onverwags. Almal kyk na haar. “Die Aurors is deel van die Vrottand-sameswering; ek dog almal weet dit. Hulle werk van binne af om die Ministerie van Towerkuns te ondermyn met ’n kombinasie van Donker toorkuns en tandvleissiektes.”

Harry asem die helfte van sy heuningbier in sy neus in op soos wat hy begin lag. Dit was die moeite werd om Luna net hiervoor saam te bring. Toe hy proesend, papnat, maar nog steeds laggend van sy beker af opkyk, sien hy iets wat hom selfs nóg meer amuseer: Argus Filch trek Draco Malfoy aan die oor na hulle toe.

“Professor Slughorn,” hyg Filch terwyl sy kake bewe en sy uitpeuloë blink van die maniese lig wat hulle kry wanneer hy iemand uitvang wat ’n reël oortree, “ek het hierdie seun in ’n gang hier bo betrap. Hy gee voor hy is na u partytjie genooi en hy is net effens laat. Het u ’n uitnodiging aan hom gerig?”

Malfoy ruk hom los uit Filch se greep en lyk woedend.

“Oukei, ek is nie genooi nie!” sê hy briesend. “Ek het ongenooi hier probeer inkom. Tevrede?”

“Nee, ek is nie!” maak Filch ’n stelling wat die vrolike uitdrukking op sy gesig heeltemal weerspreek. “Jy is in die moeilikheid, meneertjie! Het die Skoolhoof julle nie verbied om saans sonder toestemming rond te sluip nie?”

“Ag, toemaar, Argus, toemaar,” sê Slughorn en waai met sy hand. “Dis Kersfees en dis nie ’n misdaad om na ’n partytjie toe te wil kom nie. Ons sal jou hierdie een keer oorsien; jy mag maar bly, Draco.”

Harry kan Filch se uitdrukking van verontwaardigde teleurstelling verstaan, maar hoekom lyk Malfoy amper net so ongelukkig? En hoekom kyk Snape na Malfoy asof hy kwaad is en ... is dit moontlik? ... effens bang?

Maar nog voor Harry heeltemal registreer wat hy gesien het, draai Filch om en skuifel weg terwyl hy onderlangs brom; Malfoy sit ’n glimlag op sy gesig en bedank Slughorn vir sy groothartigheid en Snape se gesig is weer glad en geslote.

“Dis niks, niks nie,” sê Slughorn en wuif Malfoy se bedankings tersyde. “Per slot van rekening hét ek jou oupa geken ...”

“Hy het altyd met groot lof van professor gepraat,” sê Malfoy vin-nig. “Hy’t gesê u is die beste towerdrankiemaker wat hy nog ooit geken het ...”

Harry staar Malfoy aan. Dit is nie die witvoetjiesoekery wat hom verbaas nie; hy het Malfoy dit al hoeveel keer met Snape sien doen. Dit is die feit dat Malfoy werklik ’n bietjie siek lyk. Harry het Malfoy lanklaas van naby gesien; daar is donker kringe onder sy oë en sy vel het ’n grys kleur.

“Ek wil met jou praat. Draco,” sê Snape skielik.

“Og, kom nou, Severus,” keer Slughorn en hik weer, “dis Kersfees. Moenie te streng –”

“Ek is sy Huishoof en ek sal besluit hoe streng ek wil wees, of nie,” sê Snape stug. “Volg my, Draco.”

Hulle loop; Snape voor, met Malfoy gegrief agter hom aan. Harry staan vir ’n oomblik besluiteloos en sê dan: “Ek’s nou weer terug, Luna; ek – e – gaan gou kledkamer toe.”

“Als reg,” sê sy vrolik en terwyl hy verby die mense probeer kom, verbeel hy hom hy hoor hoe hervat sy haar gesprek oor die Vrottandsameswering met professor Trelawney, wat lyk of sy opreg daarin belangstel.

Toe hy eers by die partytjie uit is, is die gang verlate en dit is maklik om sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel uit sy sak te haal en oor hom te gooi. Maar dit is nie so maklik om Snape en Malfoy te kry nie. Harry hard-

loop met die gang af; gelukkig word sy voeteval verdoof deur die musiek en harde gepraat wat nog steeds uit Slughorn se kantoor hoorbaar is. Miskien het Snape Malfoy na sy kantoor in die kerkers gevat ... of miskien vat hy hom terug na Slytherin se geselskamer ... maar Harry druk sy oor teen deur ná deur soos wat hy met die gang af beweeg totdat hy skielik met 'n skok van opwinding by die laaste klaskamer in die gang stemme deur die sleutelgat hoor.

“... kan nie bekostig om foute te maak nie, Draco, want as jy geskors word –”

“Ek het niks daarmee te doen gehad nie, oukei?”

“Ek hoop jy praat die waarheid, want dit was sowel lomp as onnosel. Jy word alreeds van aandadigheid daaraan verdink.”

“Wie verdink my?” vra Malfoy kwaad. “Vir die laaste keer, ek het dit nie gedoen nie, oukei? Daai Bell-meisiekind moet 'n vyand hê van wie niemand weet nie – moenie so vir my kyk nie! Ek weet wat jy doen, ek's nie onnosel nie, maar dit gaan nie werk nie – ek kan jou keer!”

Daar is 'n pouse en dan sê Snape sag: “A ... ek sien tante Bellatrix het vir jou Okklumensielesse gegee. Watter gedagtes probeer jy vir jou meester wegsteek, Draco?”

“Ek probeer niks vir *hom* wegsteek nie; ek wil net nie hê jy moet jou neus daarin steek nie!”

Harry druk sy oor nog stywer teen die sleutelgat ... wat gaan aan dat Malfoy só met Snape praat, Snape wat hy nog altyd met respek behandel het, Snape van wie hy nog altyd gehou het?

“So *dit* is hoekom jy my hierdie kwartaal vermy het? Jy was bang ek meng my in? Besef jy dat as enigiemand anders ná herhaaldelike versoeke versuim het om na my kantoor te kom, dan –”

“Nou gee my dan detensie! Rapporteer my by Dumbledore!” tart Malfoy.

Daar is weer 'n pouse. Dan sê Snape: “Jy weet baie goed ek wil nie een van die twee doen nie.”

“Nou hou dan op om my na jou kantoor toe te ontbied!”

“Luister na my,” sê Snape en sy stem is nou so sag dat Harry sy oor nóg stywer teen die sleutelgat moet druk om te kan hoor. “Ek probeer jou help. Ek het vir jou ma gesweer ek sal jou beskerm. Ek het die Onbreekbare Eed gesweer, Draco –”

“Jy sal dit maar net móét verbreek, want ek het nie jou beskerming nodig nie! Dis my opdrag; hy't dit vir my gegee en ek gaan dit uitvoer. Ek het 'n plan en dit gaan werk; dit vat net bietjie langer as wat ek gedink het dit sou!”

“Wat is jou plan?”

“Dit traak jou nie!”

“As jy my sê wat jy wil probeer doen, kan ek jou help –”

“Ek het al die hulp wat ek nodig het, dankie; ek is nie alleen nie!”

“Jy was vanaand beslis alleen, wat uiterste waansin was – om alleen in die gange rond te sluip, sonder bystand of iemand wat jou agterhoede dek. Jy maak elementêre foute – ”

“Ek sou Crabbe en Goyle by my gehad het as jy nie vir hulle detensie gegee het nie!”

“Praat sagter!” spoeg Snape, want Malfoy se stem word al hoër soos hy hom opwerk. “As jou vriende Crabbe en Goyle hierdie keer hul UIL Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste wil deurkom, sal hulle ’n bietjie harder moet werk as wat hulle op die oombt–”

“Wat maak dit saak?” sê Malfoy. “Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste – dis alles ’n grap, alles net ’n klug. Vir wat het ons kastig beskerming teen die Donker Kunste nodig?”

“Dit is ’n klug wat noodsaaklik is as ons sukses wil behaal, Draco!” sê Snape. “Waar dink jy sou ek al hierdie jare gewees het as ek nie geweet het hoe om op te tree nie? Luister nou na my! Dis onverskillig van jou om saans rond te sluip en gevang te word, en as jy op assistente soos Crabbe en Goyle se ondersteuning staatmaak –”

“Hulle is nie die enigstes nie; ek het ander mense ook aan my kant, beter mense!”

“Nou hoekom neem jy my dan nie in jou vertrouwe nie? Dan kan ek –”

“Ek weet wat jy wil doen. Jy wil my glorie steel!”

Daar is weer ’n pouse en dan sê Snape kil: “Jy praat soos ’n kind. Ek kan verstaan dat jy ontsteld is oor jou pa gearresteer en in die tronk opgesluit is, maar –”

Harry kry skaars ’n sekonde waarskuwing; hy hoor Malfoy se voetstappe aan die ander kant van die deur en spring uit die pad toe dit oopvlieg. Malfoy loop vervaard met die gang af, verby Slughorn se oop kantoordeur, om die hoek onder in die gang en verdwyn dan uit sig.

Harry waag dit skaars om asem te haal en buk laag af toe Snape stadig by die klaskamer uitkom. Sy uitdrukking is onpeilbaar en hy stap terug na die partytjie toe. Harry bly plat op die vloer, weggesteek onder die Mantel, en sy kop werk teen die spoed van wit lig.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



A VERY FROSTY CHRISTMAS

So Snape was offering to help him? He was definitely *offering to help him?*”

“If you ask that once more,” said Harry, “I’m going to stick this sprout —”

“I’m only checking!” said Ron. They were standing alone at the Burrow’s kitchen sink, peeling a mountain of sprouts for Mrs. Weasley. Snow was drifting past the window in front of them.

“*Yes, Snape was offering to help him!*” said Harry. “He said he’d promised Malfoy’s mother to protect him, that he’d made an Unbreakable Oath or something —”

“An Unbreakable Vow?” said Ron, looking stunned. “Nah, he can’t have. . . . Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” said Harry. “Why, what does it mean?”

“Well, you can’t break an Unbreakable Vow. . . .”

“I’d worked that much out for myself, funnily enough. What happens if you break it, then?”

“You die,” said Ron simply. “Fred and George tried to get me to make one when I was about five. I nearly did too, I was holding hands with Fred and everything when Dad found us. He went mental,” said Ron, with a reminiscent gleam in his eyes. “Only time I’ve ever seen Dad as angry as Mum. Fred reckons his left buttock has never been the same since.”

“Yeah, well, passing over Fred’s left buttock —”

“I beg your pardon?” said Fred’s voice as the twins entered the kitchen.

“Aaah, George, look at this. They’re using knives and everything. Bless them.”

“I’ll be seventeen in two and a bit months’ time,” said Ron grumpily, “and then I’ll be able to do it by magic!”

“But meanwhile,” said George, sitting down at the kitchen table and putting his feet up on it, “we can enjoy watching you demonstrate the correct use of a — whoops-a-daisy!”

“You made me do that!” said Ron angrily, sucking his cut thumb. “You wait, when I’m seventeen —”

“I’m sure you’ll dazzle us all with hitherto unsuspected magical skills,” yawned Fred.

“And speaking of hitherto unsuspected skills, Ronald,” said

George, “what is this we hear from Ginny about you and a young lady called — unless our information is faulty — Lavender Brown?”

Ron turned a little pink, but did not look displeased as he turned back to the sprouts. “Mind your own business.”

“What a snappy retort,” said Fred. “I really don’t know how you think of them. No, what we wanted to know was . . . how did it happen?”

“What d’you mean?”

“Did she have an accident or something?”

“What?”

“Well, how did she sustain such extensive brain damage? Careful, now!”

Mrs. Weasley entered the room just in time to see Ron throw the sprout knife at Fred, who had turned it into a paper airplane with one lazy flick of his wand.

“*Ron!*” she said furiously. “Don’t you ever let me see you throwing knives again!”

“I won’t,” said Ron, “let you see,” he added under his breath, as he turned back to the sprout mountain.

“Fred, George, I’m sorry, dears, but Remus is arriving tonight, so Bill will have to squeeze in with you two.”

“No problem,” said George.

“Then, as Charlie isn’t coming home, that just leaves Harry and Ron in the attic, and if Fleur shares with Ginny —”

“— that’ll make Ginny’s Christmas —” muttered Fred.

“— everyone should be comfortable. Well, they’ll have a bed,

anyway,” said Mrs. Weasley, sounding slightly harassed.

“Percy definitely not showing his ugly face, then?” asked Fred.

Mrs. Weasley turned away before she answered. “No, he’s busy, I expect, at the Ministry.”

“Or he’s the world’s biggest prat,” said Fred, as Mrs. Weasley left the kitchen. “One of the two. Well, let’s get going, then, George.”

“What are you two up to?” asked Ron. “Can’t you help us with these sprouts? You could just use your wand and then we’ll be free too!”

“No, I don’t think we can do that,” said Fred seriously. “It’s very character-building stuff, learning to peel sprouts without magic, makes you appreciate how difficult it is for Muggles and Squibs —”

“— and if you want people to help you, Ron,” added George, throwing the paper airplane at him, “I wouldn’t chuck knives at them. Just a little hint. We’re off to the village, there’s a very pretty girl working in the paper shop who thinks my card tricks are something marvelous . . . almost like real magic. . . .”

“Gits,” said Ron darkly, watching Fred and George setting off across the snowy yard. “Would’ve only taken them ten seconds and then we could’ve gone too.”

“I couldn’t,” said Harry. “I promised Dumbledore I wouldn’t wander off while I’m staying here.”

“Oh yeah,” said Ron. He peeled a few more sprouts and then said, “Are you going to tell Dumbledore what you heard Snape and Malfoy saying to each other?”

“Yep,” said Harry. “I’m going to tell anyone who can put a stop to it, and Dumbledore’s top of the list. I might have another word with

your dad too.”

“Pity you didn’t hear what Malfoy’s actually doing, though.”

“I couldn’t have done, could I? That was the whole point, he was refusing to tell Snape.”

There was silence for a moment or two, then Ron said, “‘Course, you know what they’ll all say? Dad and Dumbledore and all of them? They’ll say Snape isn’t really trying to help Malfoy, he was just trying to find out what Malfoy’s up to.”

“They didn’t hear him,” said Harry flatly. “No one’s that good an actor, not even Snape.”

“Yeah . . . I’m just saying, though,” said Ron.

Harry turned to face him, frowning. “You think I’m right, though?”

“Yeah, I do!” said Ron hastily. “Seriously, I do! But they’re all convinced Snape’s in the Order, aren’t they?”

Harry said nothing. It had already occurred to him that this would be the most likely objection to his new evidence; he could hear Hermione now: *Obviously, Harry, he was pretending to offer help so he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he’s doing. . . .*

This was pure imagination, however, as he had had no opportunity to tell Hermione what he had overheard. She had disappeared from Slughorn’s party before he returned to it, or so he had been informed by an irate McLaggen, and she had already gone to bed by the time he returned to the common room. As he and Ron had left for the Burrow early the next day, he had barely had time to wish her a happy Christmas and to tell her that he had some very important news when they got back from the holidays. He was not entirely sure that she had heard him, though; Ron and Lavender had been saying a thoroughly

nonverbal good-bye just behind him at the time.

Still, even Hermione would not be able to deny one thing: Malfoy was definitely up to something, and Snape knew it, so Harry felt fully justified in saying “I told you so,” which he had done several times to Ron already.

Harry did not get the chance to speak to Mr. Weasley, who was working very long hours at the Ministry, until Christmas Eve night. The Weasleys and their guests were sitting in the living room, which Ginny had decorated so lavishly that it was rather like sitting in a paper-chain explosion. Fred, George, Harry, and Ron were the only ones who knew that the angel on top of the tree was actually a garden gnome that had bitten Fred on the ankle as he pulled up carrots for Christmas dinner. Stupefied, painted gold, stuffed into a miniature tutu and with small wings glued to its back, it glowered down at them all, the ugliest angel Harry had ever seen, with a large bald head like a potato and rather hairy feet.

They were all supposed to be listening to a Christmas broadcast by Mrs. Weasley’s favorite singer, Celestina Warbeck, whose voice was warbling out of the large wooden wireless set. Fleur, who seemed to find Celestina very dull, was talking so loudly in the corner that a scowling Mrs. Weasley kept pointing her wand at the volume control, so that Celestina grew louder and louder. Under cover of a particularly jazzy number called “A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love,” Fred and George started a game of Exploding Snap with Ginny. Ron kept shooting Bill and Fleur covert looks, as though hoping to pick up tips. Meanwhile, Remus Lupin, who was thinner and more ragged-looking than ever, was sitting beside the fire,

staring into its depths as though he could not hear Celestina's voice.

*Oh, come and stir my cauldron,
And if you do it right,
I'll boil you up some hot strong love
To keep you warm tonight.*

"We danced to this when we were eighteen!" said Mrs. Weasley, wiping her eyes on her knitting. "Do you remember, Arthur?"

"Mphf?" said Mr. Weasley, whose head had been nodding over the satsuma he was peeling. "Oh yes . . . marvelous tune . . ."

With an effort, he sat up a little straighter and looked around at Harry, who was sitting next to him.

"Sorry about this," he said, jerking his head toward the wireless as Celestina broke into the chorus. "Be over soon."

"No problem," said Harry, grinning. "Has it been busy at the Ministry?"

"Very," said Mr. Weasley. "I wouldn't mind if we were getting anywhere, but of the three arrests we've made in the last couple of months, I doubt that one of them is a genuine Death Eater — only don't repeat that, Harry," he added quickly, looking much more awake all of a sudden.

"They're not still holding Stan Shunpike, are they?" asked Harry.

"I'm afraid so," said Mr. Weasley. "I know Dumbledore's tried appealing directly to Scrimgeour about Stan. . . . I mean, anybody who has actually interviewed him agrees that he's about as much a Death Eater as this satsuma . . . but the top levels want to look as

though they're making some progress, and 'three arrests' sounds better than 'three mistaken arrests and releases' . . . but again, this is all top secret. . . ."

"I won't say anything," said Harry. He hesitated for a moment, wondering how best to embark on what he wanted to say; as he marshaled his thoughts, Celestina Warbeck began a ballad called "You Charmed the Heart Right Out of Me."

"Mr. Weasley, you know what I told you at the station when we were setting off for school?"

"I checked, Harry," said Mr. Weasley at once. "I went and searched the Malfoys' house. There was nothing, either broken or whole, that shouldn't have been there."

"Yeah, I know, I saw in the *Prophet* that you'd looked . . . but this is something different. . . . Well, something more . . ."

And he told Mr. Weasley everything he had overheard between Malfoy and Snape. As Harry spoke, he saw Lupin's head turn a little toward him, taking in every word. When he had finished, there was silence, except for Celestina's crooning.

Oh, my poor heart, where has it gone?

It's left me for a spell . . .

"Has it occurred to you, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, "that Snape was simply pretending — ?"

"Pretending to offer help, so that he could find out what Malfoy's up to?" said Harry quickly. "Yeah, I thought you'd say that. But how do we know?"

“It isn’t our business to know,” said Lupin unexpectedly. He had turned his back on the fire now and faced Harry across Mr. Weasley. “It’s Dumbledore’s business. Dumbledore trusts Severus, and that ought to be good enough for all of us.”

“But,” said Harry, “just say — just say Dumbledore’s wrong about Snape —”

“People have said it, many times. It comes down to whether or not you trust Dumbledore’s judgment. I do; therefore, I trust Severus.”

“But Dumbledore can make mistakes,” argued Harry. “He says it himself. And you” — he looked Lupin straight in the eye — “do you honestly like Snape?”

“I neither like nor dislike Severus,” said Lupin. “No, Harry, I am speaking the truth,” he added, as Harry pulled a skeptical expression. “We shall never be bosom friends, perhaps; after all that happened between James and Sirius and Severus, there is too much bitterness there. But I do not forget that during the year I taught at Hogwarts, Severus made the Wolfsbane Potion for me every month, made it perfectly, so that I did not have to suffer as I usually do at the full moon.”

“But he ‘accidentally’ let it slip that you’re a werewolf, so you had to leave!” said Harry angrily.

Lupin shrugged. “The news would have leaked out anyway. We both know he wanted my job, but he could have wreaked much worse damage on me by tampering with the potion. He kept me healthy. I must be grateful.”

“Maybe he didn’t dare mess with the potion with Dumbledore watching him!” said Harry.

“You are determined to hate him, Harry,” said Lupin with a faint smile. “And I understand; with James as your father, with Sirius as your godfather, you have inherited an old prejudice. By all means tell Dumbledore what you have told Arthur and me, but do not expect him to share your view of the matter; do not even expect him to be surprised by what you tell him. It might have been on Dumbledore’s orders that Severus questioned Draco.”

*. . . and now you’ve torn it quite apart
I’ll thank you to give back my heart!*

Celestina ended her song on a very long, high-pitched note and loud applause issued out of the wireless, which Mrs. Weasley joined in with enthusiastically.

“Eez eet over?” said Fleur loudly. “Thank goodness, what an ’orrible —”

“Shall we have a nightcap, then?” asked Mr. Weasley loudly, leaping to his feet. “Who wants eggnog?”

“What have you been up to lately?” Harry asked Lupin, as Mr. Weasley bustled off to fetch the eggnog, and everybody else stretched and broke into conversation.

“Oh, I’ve been underground,” said Lupin. “Almost literally. That’s why I haven’t been able to write, Harry; sending letters to you would have been something of a giveaway.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been living among my fellows, my equals,” said Lupin. “Werewolves,” he added, at Harry’s look of incomprehension. “Nearly all of them are on Voldemort’s side. Dumbledore wanted a

spy and here I was . . . ready-made.”

He sounded a little bitter, and perhaps realized it, for he smiled more warmly as he went on, “I am not complaining; it is necessary work and who can do it better than I? However, it has been difficult gaining their trust. I bear the unmistakable signs of having tried to live among wizards, you see, whereas they have shunned normal society and live on the margins, stealing — and sometimes killing — to eat.”

“How come they like Voldemort?”

“They think that, under his rule, they will have a better life,” said Lupin. “And it is hard to argue with Greyback out there. . . .”

“Who’s Greyback?”

“You haven’t heard of him?” Lupin’s hands closed convulsively in his lap. “Fenrir Greyback is, perhaps, the most savage werewolf alive today. He regards it as his mission in life to bite and to contaminate as many people as possible; he wants to create enough werewolves to overcome the wizards. Voldemort has promised him prey in return for his services. Greyback specializes in children. . . . Bite them young, he says, and raise them away from their parents, raise them to hate normal wizards. Voldemort has threatened to unleash him upon people’s sons and daughters; it is a threat that usually produces good results.”

Lupin paused and then said, “It was Greyback who bit me.”

“What?” said Harry, astonished. “When — when you were a kid, you mean?”

“Yes. My father had offended him. I did not know, for a very long time, the identity of the werewolf who had attacked me; I even felt

pity for him, thinking that he had had no control, knowing by then how it felt to transform. But Greyback is not like that. At the full moon, he positions himself close to victims, ensuring that he is near enough to strike. He plans it all. And this is the man Voldemort is using to marshal the werewolves. I cannot pretend that my particular brand of reasoned argument is making much headway against Greyback's insistence that we werewolves deserve blood, that we ought to revenge ourselves on normal people."

"But you are normal!" said Harry fiercely. "You've just got a — a problem —"

Lupin burst out laughing. "Sometimes you remind me a lot of James. He called it my 'furry little problem' in company. Many people were under the impression that I owned a badly behaved rabbit."

He accepted a glass of eggnog from Mr. Weasley with a word of thanks, looking slightly more cheerful. Harry, meanwhile, felt a rush of excitement: This last mention of his father had reminded him that there was something he had been looking forward to asking Lupin.

"Have you ever heard of someone called the Half-Blood Prince?"

"The Half-Blood what?"

"Prince," said Harry, watching him closely for signs of recognition.

"There are no Wizarding princes," said Lupin, now smiling. "Is this a title you're thinking of adopting? I should have thought being 'the Chosen One' would be enough."

"It's nothing to do with me!" said Harry indignantly. "The Half-Blood Prince is someone who used to go to Hogwarts, I've got his

old Potions book. He wrote spells all over it, spells he invented. One of them was Levicorpus —”

“Oh, that one had a great vogue during my time at Hogwarts,” said Lupin reminiscently. “There were a few months in my fifth year when you couldn’t move for being hoisted into the air by your ankle.”

“My dad used it,” said Harry. “I saw him in the Pensieve, he used it on Snape.”

He tried to sound casual, as though this was a throwaway comment of no real importance, but he was not sure he had achieved the right effect; Lupin’s smile was a little too understanding.

“Yes,” he said, “but he wasn’t the only one. As I say, it was very popular. . . . You know how these spells come and go. . . .”

“But it sounds like it was invented while you were at school,” Harry persisted.

“Not necessarily,” said Lupin. “Jinxes go in and out of fashion like everything else.”

He looked into Harry’s face and then said quietly, “James was a pureblood, Harry, and I promise you, he never asked us to call him ‘Prince.’”

Abandoning pretense, Harry said, “And it wasn’t Sirius? Or you?”

“Definitely not.”

“Oh.” Harry stared into the fire. “I just thought — well, he’s helped me out a lot in Potions classes, the Prince has.”

“How old is this book, Harry?”

“I dunno, I’ve never checked.”

“Well, perhaps that will give you some clue as to when the Prince was at Hogwarts,” said Lupin.

Shortly after this, Fleur decided to imitate Celestina singing “A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love,” which was taken by everyone, once they had glimpsed Mrs. Weasley’s expression, to be the cue to go to bed. Harry and Ron climbed all the way up to Ron’s attic bedroom, where a camp bed had been added for Harry.

Ron fell asleep almost immediately, but Harry delved into his trunk and pulled out his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* before getting into bed. There he turned its pages, searching, until he finally found, at the front of the book, the date that it had been published. It was nearly fifty years old. Neither his father, nor his father’s friends, had been at Hogwarts fifty years ago. Feeling disappointed, Harry threw the book back into his trunk, turned off the lamp, and rolled over, thinking of werewolves and Snape, Stan Shunpike and the Half-Blood Prince, and finally falling into an uneasy sleep full of creeping shadows and the cries of bitten children. . . .

“She’s got to be joking. . . .”

Harry woke with a start to find a bulging stocking lying over the end of his bed. He put on his glasses and looked around; the tiny window was almost completely obscured with snow and, in front of it, Ron was sitting bolt upright in bed and examining what appeared to be a thick gold chain.

“What’s that?” asked Harry.

“It’s from Lavender,” said Ron, sounding revolted. “She can’t honestly think I’d wear . . .”

Harry looked more closely and let out a shout of laughter. Dangling from the chain in large gold letters were the words:

My Sweetheart

“Nice,” he said. “Classy. You should definitely wear it in front of Fred and George.”

“If you tell them,” said Ron, shoving the necklace out of sight under his pillow, “I — I — I’ll —”

“Stutter at me?” said Harry, grinning. “Come on, would I?”

“How could she think I’d like something like that, though?” Ron demanded of thin air, looking rather shocked.

“Well, think back,” said Harry. “Have you ever let it slip that you’d like to go out in public with the words ‘My Sweetheart’ round your neck?”

“Well . . . we don’t really talk much,” said Ron. “It’s mainly . . .”

“Snogging,” said Harry.

“Well, yeah,” said Ron. He hesitated a moment, then said, “Is Hermione really going out with McLaggen?”

“I dunno,” said Harry. “They were at Slughorn’s party together, but I don’t think it went that well.”

Ron looked slightly more cheerful as he delved deeper into his stocking.

Harry’s presents included a sweater with a large Golden Snitch worked onto the front, hand-knitted by Mrs. Weasley, a large box of Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes products from the twins, and a slightly damp, moldy-smelling package that came with a label reading TO MASTER, FROM KREACHER.

Harry stared at it. “D’you reckon this is safe to open?” he asked.

“Can’t be anything dangerous, all our mail’s still being searched at

the Ministry,” replied Ron, though he was eyeing the parcel suspiciously.

“I didn’t think of giving Kreacher anything. Do people usually give their house-elves Christmas presents?” asked Harry, prodding the parcel cautiously.

“Hermione would,” said Ron. “But let’s wait and see what it is before you start feeling guilty.”

A moment later, Harry had given a loud yell and leapt out of his camp bed; the package contained a large number of maggots.

“Nice,” said Ron, roaring with laughter. “Very thoughtful.”

“I’d rather have them than that necklace,” said Harry, which sobered Ron up at once.

Everybody was wearing new sweaters when they all sat down for Christmas lunch, everyone except Fleur (on whom, it appeared, Mrs. Weasley had not wanted to waste one) and Mrs. Weasley herself, who was sporting a brand-new midnight blue witch’s hat glittering with what looked like tiny starlike diamonds, and a spectacular golden necklace.

“Fred and George gave them to me! Aren’t they beautiful?”

“Well, we find we appreciate you more and more, Mum, now we’re washing our own socks,” said George, waving an airy hand. “Parsnips, Remus?”

“Harry, you’ve got a maggot in your hair,” said Ginny cheerfully, leaning across the table to pick it out; Harry felt goose bumps erupt up his neck that had nothing to do with the maggot.

“Ow ’orrible,” said Fleur, with an affected little shudder.

“Yes, isn’t it?” said Ron. “Gravy, Fleur?”

In his eagerness to help her, he knocked the gravy boat flying; Bill waved his wand and the gravy soared up in the air and returned meekly to the boat.

“You are as bad as zat Tonks,” said Fleur to Ron, when she had finished kissing Bill in thanks. “She is always knocking —”

“I invited *dear* Tonks to come along today,” said Mrs. Weasley, setting down the carrots with unnecessary force and glaring at Fleur. “But she wouldn’t come. Have you spoken to her lately, Remus?”

“No, I haven’t been in contact with anybody very much,” said Lupin. “But Tonks has got her own family to go to, hasn’t she?”

“Hmmm,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Maybe. I got the impression she was planning to spend Christmas alone, actually.”

She gave Lupin an annoyed look, as though it was all his fault she was getting Fleur for a daughter-in-law instead of Tonks, but Harry, glancing across at Fleur, who was now feeding Bill bits of turkey off her own fork, thought that Mrs. Weasley was fighting a long-lost battle. He was, however, reminded of a question he had with regard to Tonks, and who better to ask than Lupin, the man who knew all about Patronuses?

“Tonks’s Patronus has changed its form,” he told him. “Snape said so anyway. I didn’t know that could happen. Why would your Patronus change?”

Lupin took his time chewing his turkey and swallowing before saying slowly, “Sometimes . . . a great shock . . . an emotional upheaval . . .”

“It looked big, and it had four legs,” said Harry, struck by a sudden thought and lowering his voice. “Hey . . . it couldn’t be — ?”

“Arthur!” said Mrs. Weasley suddenly. She had risen from her chair; her hand was pressed over her heart and she was staring out of the kitchen window. “Arthur — it’s Percy!”

“*What?*”

Mr. Weasley looked around. Everybody looked quickly at the window; Ginny stood up for a better look. There, sure enough, was Percy Weasley, striding across the snowy yard, his horn-rimmed glasses glinting in the sunlight. He was not, however, alone.

“Arthur, he’s — he’s with the Minister!”

And sure enough, the man Harry had seen in the *Daily Prophet* was following along in Percy’s wake, limping slightly, his mane of graying hair and his black cloak flecked with snow. Before any of them could say anything, before Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could do more than exchange stunned looks, the back door opened and there stood Percy.

There was a moment’s painful silence. Then Percy said rather stiffly, “Merry Christmas, Mother.”

“Oh, *Percy!*” said Mrs. Weasley, and she threw herself into his arms.

Rufus Scrimgeour paused in the doorway, leaning on his walking stick and smiling as he observed this affecting scene.

“You must forgive this intrusion,” he said, when Mrs. Weasley looked around at him, beaming and wiping her eyes. “Percy and I were in the vicinity — working, you know — and he couldn’t resist dropping in and seeing you all.”

But Percy showed no sign of wanting to greet any of the rest of the family. He stood, poker-straight and awkward-looking, and stared

over everybody else's heads. Mr. Weasley, Fred, and George were all observing him, stony-faced.

"Please, come in, sit down, Minister!" fluttered Mrs. Weasley, straightening her hat. "Have a little purkey, or some tooding. . . . I mean —"

"No, no, my dear Molly," said Scrimgeour. Harry guessed that he had checked her name with Percy before they entered the house. "I don't want to intrude, wouldn't be here at all if Percy hadn't wanted to see you all so badly. . . ."

"Oh, Perce!" said Mrs. Weasley tearfully, reaching up to kiss him.

". . . We've only looked in for five minutes, so I'll have a stroll around the yard while you catch up with Percy. No, no, I assure you I don't want to butt in! Well, if anybody cared to show me your charming garden . . . Ah, that young man's finished, why doesn't he take a stroll with me?"

The atmosphere around the table changed perceptibly. Everybody looked from Scrimgeour to Harry. Nobody seemed to find Scrimgeour's pretense that he did not know Harry's name convincing, or find it natural that he should be chosen to accompany the Minister around the garden when Ginny, Fleur, and George also had clean plates.

"Yeah, all right," said Harry into the silence.

He was not fooled; for all Scrimgeour's talk that they had just been in the area, that Percy wanted to look up his family, this must be the real reason that they had come, so that Scrimgeour could speak to Harry alone.

"It's fine," he said quietly, as he passed Lupin, who had half risen

from his chair. “Fine,” he added, as Mr. Weasley opened his mouth to speak.

“Wonderful!” said Scrimgeour, standing back to let Harry pass through the door ahead of him. “We’ll just take a turn around the garden, and Percy and I’ll be off. Carry on, everyone!”

Harry walked across the yard toward the Weasleys’ overgrown, snow-covered garden, Scrimgeour limping slightly at his side. He had, Harry knew, been Head of the Auror office; he looked tough and battle-scarred, very different from portly Fudge in his bowler hat.

“Charming,” said Scrimgeour, stopping at the garden fence and looking out over the snowy lawn and the indistinguishable plants. “Charming.”

Harry said nothing. He could tell that Scrimgeour was watching him.

“I’ve wanted to meet you for a very long time,” said Scrimgeour, after a few moments. “Did you know that?”

“No,” said Harry truthfully.

“Oh yes, for a very long time. But Dumbledore has been very protective of you,” said Scrimgeour. “Natural, of course, natural, after what you’ve been through. . . . Especially what happened at the Ministry . . .”

He waited for Harry to say something, but Harry did not oblige, so he went on, “I have been hoping for an occasion to talk to you ever since I gained office, but Dumbledore has — most understandably, as I say — prevented this.”

Still, Harry said nothing, waiting.

“The rumors that have flown around!” said Scrimgeour. “Well, of

course, we both know how these stories get distorted . . . all these whispers of a prophecy . . . of you being ‘the Chosen One’ . . .”

They were getting near it now, Harry thought, the reason Scrimgeour was here.

“ . . . I assume that Dumbledore has discussed these matters with you?”

Harry deliberated, wondering whether he ought to lie or not. He looked at the little gnome prints all around the flowerbeds, and the scuffed-up patch that marked the spot where Fred had caught the gnome now wearing the tutu at the top of the Christmas tree. Finally, he decided on the truth . . . or a bit of it.

“Yeah, we’ve discussed it.”

“Have you, have you . . .” said Scrimgeour. Harry could see, out of the corner of his eye, Scrimgeour squinting at him, so he pretended to be very interested in a gnome that had just poked its head out from underneath a frozen rhododendron. “And what has Dumbledore told you, Harry?”

“Sorry, but that’s between us,” said Harry. He kept his voice as pleasant as he could, and Scrimgeour’s tone, too, was light and friendly as he said, “Oh, of course, if it’s a question of confidences, I wouldn’t want you to divulge . . . no, no . . . and in any case, does it really matter whether you are ‘the Chosen One’ or not?”

Harry had to mull that one over for a few seconds before responding. “I don’t really know what you mean, Minister.”

“Well, of course, to *you* it will matter enormously,” said Scrimgeour with a laugh. “But to the Wizarding community at large . . . it’s all perception, isn’t it? It’s what people believe that’s

important.”

Harry said nothing. He thought he saw, dimly, where they were heading, but he was not going to help Scrimgeour get there. The gnome under the rhododendron was now digging for worms at its roots, and Harry kept his eyes fixed upon it.

“People believe you *are* ‘the Chosen One,’ you see,” said Scrimgeour. “They think you quite the hero — which, of course, you are, Harry, chosen or not! How many times have you faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named now? Well, anyway,” he pressed on, without waiting for a reply, “the point is, you are a symbol of hope for many, Harry. The idea that there is somebody out there who might be able, who might even be *destined*, to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named — well, naturally, it gives people a lift. And I can’t help but feel that, once you realize this, you might consider it, well, almost a duty, to stand alongside the Ministry, and give everyone a boost.”

The gnome had just managed to get hold of a worm. It was now tugging very hard on it, trying to get it out of the frozen ground. Harry was silent so long that Scrimgeour said, looking from Harry to the gnome, “Funny little chaps, aren’t they? But what say you, Harry?”

“I don’t exactly understand what you want,” said Harry slowly. “‘Stand alongside the Ministry’ . . . What does that mean?”

“Oh, well, nothing at all onerous, I assure you,” said Scrimgeour. “If you were to be seen popping in and out of the Ministry from time to time, for instance, that would give the right impression. And of course, while you were there, you would have ample opportunity to speak to Gawain Robards, my successor as Head of the Auror office. Dolores Umbridge has told me that you cherish an ambition to

become an Auror. Well, that could be arranged very easily. . . .”

Harry felt anger bubbling in the pit of his stomach: So Dolores Umbridge was still at the Ministry, was she?

“So basically,” he said, as though he just wanted to clarify a few points, “you’d like to give the impression that I’m working for the Ministry?”

“It would give everyone a lift to think you were more involved, Harry,” said Scrimgeour, sounding relieved that Harry had cottoned on so quickly. “‘The Chosen One,’ you know . . . It’s all about giving people hope, the feeling that exciting things are happening. . . .”

“But if I keep running in and out of the Ministry,” said Harry, still endeavoring to keep his voice friendly, “won’t that seem as though I approve of what the Ministry’s up to?”

“Well,” said Scrimgeour, frowning slightly, “well, yes, that’s partly why we’d like —”

“No, I don’t think that’ll work,” said Harry pleasantly. “You see, I don’t like some of the things the Ministry’s doing. Locking up Stan Shunpike, for instance.”

Scrimgeour did not speak for a moment but his expression hardened instantly. “I would not expect you to understand,” he said, and he was not as successful at keeping anger out of his voice as Harry had been. “These are dangerous times, and certain measures need to be taken. You are sixteen years old —”

“Dumbledore’s a lot older than sixteen, and he doesn’t think Stan should be in Azkaban either,” said Harry. “You’re making Stan a scapegoat, just like you want to make me a mascot.”

They looked at each other, long and hard. Finally Scrimgeour said,

with no pretense at warmth, “I see. You prefer — like your hero, Dumbledore — to disassociate yourself from the Ministry?”

“I don’t want to be used,” said Harry.

“Some would say it’s your duty to be used by the Ministry!”

“Yeah, and others might say it’s your duty to check that people really are Death Eaters before you chuck them in prison,” said Harry, his temper rising now. “You’re doing what Barty Crouch did. You never get it right, you people, do you? Either we’ve got Fudge, pretending everything’s lovely while people get murdered right under his nose, or we’ve got you, chucking the wrong people into jail and trying to pretend you’ve got ‘the Chosen One’ working for you!”

“So you’re not ‘the Chosen One’?” said Scrimgeour.

“I thought you said it didn’t matter either way?” said Harry, with a bitter laugh. “Not to you anyway.”

“I shouldn’t have said that,” said Scrimgeour quickly. “It was tactless —”

“No, it was honest,” said Harry. “One of the only honest things you’ve said to me. You don’t care whether I live or die, but you do care that I help you convince everyone you’re winning the war against Voldemort. I haven’t forgotten, Minister. . . .”

He raised his right fist. There, shining white on the back of his cold hand, were the scars which Dolores Umbridge had forced him to carve into his own flesh: *I must not tell lies*.

“I don’t remember you rushing to my defense when I was trying to tell everyone Voldemort was back. The Ministry wasn’t so keen to be pals last year.”

They stood in silence as icy as the ground beneath their feet. The

gnome had finally managed to extricate his worm and was now sucking on it happily, leaning against the bottommost branches of the rhododendron bush.

“What is Dumbledore up to?” said Scrimgeour brusquely. “Where does he go when he is absent from Hogwarts?”

“No idea,” said Harry.

“And you wouldn’t tell me if you knew,” said Scrimgeour, “would you?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” said Harry.

“Well, then, I shall have to see whether I can’t find out by other means.”

“You can try,” said Harry indifferently. “But you seem cleverer than Fudge, so I’d have thought you’d have learned from his mistakes. He tried interfering at Hogwarts. You might have noticed he’s not Minister anymore, but Dumbledore’s still headmaster. I’d leave Dumbledore alone, if I were you.”

There was a long pause.

“Well, it is clear to me that he has done a very good job on you,” said Scrimgeour, his eyes cold and hard behind his wire-rimmed glasses. “Dumbledore’s man through and through, aren’t you, Potter?”

“Yeah, I am,” said Harry. “Glad we straightened that out.”

And turning his back on the Minister of Magic, he strode back toward the house.

'n Baie Koue Kersfees

"Snape het dus aangebied om hom te help? Hy het definitief *aangebied om hom te help?*"

"As jy my dit nog een keer vra," sê Harry, "steek ek hierdie spruit –"

"Ek maak maar net seker!" sê Ron. Hulle staan alleen by Die Konynenes se opwasbak en skil vir mevrou Weasley 'n berg spruite af. Sneeu dwarrel by die venster voor hulle verby.

"Ja, *Snape het aangebied om hom te help!*" sê Harry. "Hy't gesê hy't Malfoy se ma belowe hy sal hom beskerm en hy't 'n Onbreekbare Eed gesweer, of iets –"

"'n Onbreekbare Eed?" vra Ron verstom. "Nooit, hy sou nooit ... Is jy seker?"

"Ja, ek is seker," sê Harry. "Hoekom? Wat beteken dit?"

"Wel, mens kan nie 'n Onbreekbare Eed verbreek nie ..."

"Ek kon dit darem vir myself uitwerk, snaaks genoeg. Wat gebeur as mens dit verbreek?"

"Jy gaan dood," sê Ron eenvoudig. "Fred en George het my sover probeer kry om een af te lê toe ek omtrent vyf was. En ek hét ook amper; ek en Fred het mekaar se hande al vasgehou en alles toe Pa op ons afkom. Hy't skoon van sy kop af geraak," sê Ron en sy oë glinster terwyl hy terugdink. "Dis die enigste keer dat ek Pa so kwaad soos Ma gesien het. Fred reken sy linkerboud was daarna nog nooit weer dieselfde nie."

"Ja, oukei, vergeet nou eers van Fred se linkerboud –"

"Ekskuus?" sê Fred se stem toe die tweeling by die kombuis inkom.

"Aaaa, George, kyk hier. Hulle gebruik messe en als. Nou toe nou."

"Ek is oor twee en 'n bietjie maande sewentien," sê Ron knorrig, "en dan sal ek dit toor-toor kan doen!"

"Maar intussen," sê George, wat by die kombuistafel neerval en sy voete daarop neerplak, "kan ons kyk hoe demonstreer julle die korrekte gebruik van 'n – *oepsie!*"

“Jy’t my dit laat doen!” sê Ron kwaad en suig sy raak gesnyde duim. “Wag maar, wanneer ek sewentien is –”

“Ek is seker jy gaan ons almal verbyster met tot dusver ondenkbare magiese vaardighede,” gaap Fred.

“En gepraat van tot dusver ondenkbare vaardighede, Ronald,” sê George, “wat hoor ons by Ginny van jou en ’n jonge dame genaamd – behalwe as ons inligting verkeerd is – Lavender Brown?”

Ron word effens pienk, maar lyk nie ontevrede toe hy terugdraai na die spruite nie.

“Bemoei jou met jou eie sake.”

“Wat ’n skerp antwoord,” sê Fred. “Ek weet regtig nie hoe jy dit regkry om elke keer aan een te dink nie. Nee, wat ons wou weet, is ... hoe het dit gebeur?”

“Hoe bedoel jy?”

“Was sy in ’n ongeluk of iets?”

“Wat?”

“Wel, waar het sy sulke kwaai breinskade opgedoen? Oppas nou!”

Mevrou Weasley stap net betyds in om te sien hoe Ron die skilmes na Fred gooi wat dit met een lui swaai van sy towerstaf in ’n papiervliegtuigie verander.

“Ron!” sê sy woedend. “Moenie dat ek jou ooit weer sien messe gooi nie!”

“Ek sal nie,” sê Ron, “dat Ma my sien nie,” voeg hy onderlangs by terwyl hy weer terug na die berg spruite draai.

“Fred, George, ek is jammer, skatlams, maar Remus kom vanaand, so ek sal Bill by julle twee moet indruk.”

“G’n probleem nie,” sê George.

“En angesien Charlie nie huis toe kom nie, kan Harry en Ron op die solder slaap, en as Fleur Ginny se kamer met haar deel –”

“– sal dit Ginny se Kersfees maak –” grinnik Fred.

“– behoort almal gemaklik te wees. Of minstens ’n bed te hê,” sê mevrou Weasley en klink effens gespanne.

“Gaan Percy definitief nie sy lelike gesig hier kom wys nie?” vra Fred.

Mevrou Weasley draai weg voor sy antwoord.

“Nee, ek dink hy’s besig, by die Ministerie.”

“Of hy’s die wêreld se grootste aapstert,” sê Fred terwyl mevrou Weasley by die kombuis uitloop. “Een van die twee. Wel, George, kom, weg is ons.”

“Waarnatoe gaan julle nou?” wil Ron weet. “Hoekom help julle ons nie met die spruite nie? Swaai net ’n towerstaf, dan is ons ook los!”

“Nee, ek dink nie ons moet nie,” sê Fred ernstig. “Dit bou karakter om te leer om sonder toorkuns spruite te skil. Dit laat jou respek kry vir hoe moeilik die lewe vir Moggels en Sissers is –”

“– en as jy wil hê mense moet jou help, Ron,” voeg George by en gooi die papiervliegtuigie na hom toe, “moet jy hulle nie met messe gooi nie. Dis net ’n wenk. Ons gaan dorp toe; daar’s ’n baie mooi meisie wat in die nuusagentskap werk en sy dink my kaarttruuks is wonderlik ... amper soos regte toorgoed ...”

“Mamparras,” sê Ron terwyl hy kyk hoe Fred en George by die toegesneeude werf uitstap. “Dit sou hulle net tien sekondes gevat het, dan kon ons saam met hulle gegaan het.”

“Ek sou nie kon nie,” sê Harry. “Ek het Dumbledore belowe ek gaan nêrens heen terwyl ek hier kuier nie.”

“O ja,” sê Ron. Hy skil nog ’n paar spruite en sê dan: “Gaan jy vir Dumbledore vertel wat jy Snape en Malfoy vir mekaar hoor sê het?”

“Jip,” sê Harry. “Ek gaan vir enigiemand vertel wat ’n stokkie daarvoor kan steek, en Dumbledore is heel boaan die lys. Ek sal dalk weer met jou pa ook praat.”

“Dis jammer jy kon nie hoor wat Malfoy nou eintlik wil doen nie.”

“Maar hoe kon ek? Dis juis die hele punt – hy’t geweier om vir Snape te vertel.”

Daar is ’n oomblik of twee stilte en dan sê Ron: “Jy weet natuurlik wat hulle almal gaan sê? Pa en Dumbledore en almal? Hulle gaan sê Snape wil Malfoy nie regtig help nie; hy het maar net probeer uitvind waarmee Malfoy besig is.”

“Hulle het hom nie gehoor nie,” sê Harry oortuig van homself. “Niemand is so ’n goeie akteur nie; nie eens Snape nie.”

“Ja ... maar ek sê maar net,” sê Ron.

Harry draai fronsend na hom.

“Maar jy dink ek is reg, nè?”

“Ja, natuurlik!” sê Ron haastig. “Nee regtig, ek dink so! Maar hulle glo almal Snape is in die Orde, of hoe?”

Harry sê niks. Dit het al by hom opgekom dat dit die mees waarskynlike beswaar teen sy nuwe getuienis sal wees; hy kan Hermione al hoor:

“Komaan, Harry, dis tog duidelik: hy het aangebied om Malfoy te help om hom sover te kry om te sê wat hy wil aanvang ...”

Dit is natuurlik alles net in sy verbeelding, want hy het nog nie kans gehad om vir Hermione te vertel wat hy gehoor het nie. Teen die tyd dat hy terug by Slughorn se partytjie gekom het, het sy al verdwyn, altans dit is wat ’n ontstoke McLaggen hom vertel het, en

toe hy terug in die geselskamer kom, was sy al bed toe. Hy en Ron het die volgende oggend vroeg na Die Konynenes vertrek; Harry het skaars tyd gehad om haar 'n geseënde Kersfees toe te wens en vir haar te sê hy het baie belangrike nuus wanneer hulle van vakansie af terugkom. Hy is egter nie heeltemal seker of sy hom gehoor het nie; Ron en Lavender was op daardie tydstip agter hom met 'n deeglike, nieverbale groetery besig.

Maar selfs Hermione sal een ding nie kan ontken nie: Malfoy voer beslis iets in die mou en Snape weet dit, so Harry voel heeltemal geregverdig om te sê: "Ek het julle mos gesê", soos wat hy al verskeie kere met Ron gedoen het.

Harry kry nie kans om met meneer Weasley te praat nie, want hy werk tot Oukersaand bitter lang ure by die Ministerie. Die Weasleys en hul gaste kuier in die sitkamer wat Ginny só oordadig versier het dat dit half voel of 'n mens in 'n ontploffing van papierkettings sit. Fred, George, Harry en Ron is die enigstes wat weet die engel boaan die boom is eintlik die tuinkabouter wat Fred aan die enkel gebyt het toe hy wortels vir Oukersaand se ete uitgetrek het. Bedwelm, goud geverf, in 'n miniatuurballetrokkie geprop en met vlerke aan sy rug vasgeplak, gluur hy nou af na hulle: die lelikste engel wat Harry nog ooit gesien het, met 'n groot bleskop soos 'n aartappel en lelike, harige voete.

Hulle is veronderstel om almal te luister na 'n Kersuitvoering deur mevrou Weasley se gunstelingsangeres, Celestina Warbeck, wie se stem uit die groot houtradio tril. Fleur is blykbaar erg verveeld met Celestina, want sy praat só hard in die hoek dat 'n verontwaardige mevrou Weasley haar towerstaf herhaaldelik op die volumeknoppie rig en Celestina al harder en harder laat sing. Terwyl sy 'n besonder jazzrige nommertjie genaamd "'n Ketel Stomende, Sterk Liefde" sing, begin Fred en George 'n pot Ploffende *Snap* met Ginny speel. Ron loer aanhoudend onderlangs na Bill en Fleur asof hy hoop om wenke op te tel. Intussen sit Remus Lupin, wat maerder en meer verslons as ooit lyk, langs die vuur en staar die vlamme se dieptes in asof hy Celestina se stem nie kan hoor nie.

*"O, kom roer my ketel om en om,
en glo my, jy sal jou verstom:
Drink my liefde stomend en sterk,
En voel hoe dit op jou inwerk."*

"Ons het hierop gedans toe ons agtien was!" sê mevrou Weasley en vee haar oë aan haar breiwerk af. "Onthou jy, Arthur?"

“Hmmm?” vra meneer Weasley wie se kop al lankal knik oor die satsoema wat hy afskil. “O ja ... wonderlike deuntjie ...”

Hy sit met moeite effens regopper en kyk vir Harry wat langs hom sit.

“Jammer daaroor,” sê hy en beduie met sy kop na die radio terwyl Celestina met die koorgedeelte wegtrek. “Dis nou-nou verby.”

“G’n probleem nie,” sê Harry en grinnik. “Was dit besig by die Ministerie?”

“Baie,” sê meneer Weasley. “Ek sou nie omgee het as dit ons iewers gebring het nie, maar ons het die laaste paar maande net drie mense gearresteer en ek twyfel of een van hulle regtig ’n Doodseter is – maar moet dit nie herhaal nie, Harry,” voeg hy vinnig by en lyk skielik baie wakkerder.

“Hou hulle Stan Shunpike nog steeds aan?” vra Harry.

“Ek is bevrees, ja,” sê meneer Weasley. “Ek weet Dumbledore het probeer appelleer en direk met Scrimgeour oor Stan gepraat ... Ek bedoel, almal wat hom ondervra het, stem saam: Hy’s so min ’n Doodseter as wat hierdie satsoema een is ... maar die hoëkoppe wil hê dit moet lyk of hulle vordering maak en ‘drie arrestasies’ klink beter as ‘drie verkeerde arrestasies en vrylatings’ ... Maar weer eens, dis alles hoogs geheim ...”

“Ek sal niks sê nie,” belowe Harry. Hy huiwer vir ’n oomblik en wonder wat die beste manier is om dit wat hy wil sê, aan te pak. Terwyl hy sy gedagtes agtermekaar kry, begin Celestina die ballade “Jy Betower My Hart” sing.

“Meneer Weasley, onthou u wat ek u op die stasie vertel het, toe ons op pad skool toe was?”

“Ek het gaan seker maak, Harry,” sê meneer Weasley dadelik. “Ek het die Malfoys se huis deursoek. Daar was niks, gebreek of heel, wat nie daar mag wees nie.”

“Ja, ek weet. Ek het in die *Profeet* gesien u was daar ... Maar daar is iets anders ... wel, iets meer ...”

En hy vertel vir meneer Weasley alles wat hy Malfoy en Snape hoor sê het. Terwyl Harry praat, sien hy hoe Lupin se kop effens in sy rigting draai en hy elke woord inneem. Toe Harry klaar is, is daar stilte, behalwe Celestina se snikgesang.

“O, my hart wil ewig sing
Van jou betowering ...”

“Het jy al daaraan gedink, Harry,” sê meneer Weasley, “dat Snape dalk net gemaak het of –”

“Gemaak het of hy wil help sodat hy kan uitvind wat Malfoy beplan,” sê Harry vinnig. “Ja, ek het gedink u sal so sê. Maar hoe weet ons?”

“Dis nie vir ons om te weet nie,” sê Lupin onverwags. Hy keer sy rug op die vuur en draai om na Harry en meneer Weasley. “Dis vir Dumbledore om te weet. Hy vertrou Severus, en dit behoort vir ons almal goed genoeg te wees.”

“Maar,” sê Harry, “sê nou net – sê nou net Dumbledore is verkeerd oor Snape?”

“Mense het al baie daaroor gewonder. Maar dit kom daarop neer of jy Dumbledore se oordeel vertrou of nie. Ek vertrou hom, en daarom vertrou ek Severus.”

“Maar Dumbledore kan foute maak,” redeneer Harry. “Hy sê self so. En jy –” Hy kyk Lupin reguit in die oë. “– hou jy regtig van Snape?”

“Dit gaan nie vir my oor of ek van hom hou, of nie,” sê Lupin. “Nee, Harry, ek praat die waarheid,” voeg hy by wanneer hy sien hoe skepties hy aangekyk word. “Ons sal miskien nooit boesemvriende wees ná alles wat tussen James en Sirius en Severus gebeur het nie; daar is gans te veel bitterheid daarvoor. Maar ek onthou ook dat Severus gedurende die jaar wat ek by Hogwarts skoolgehou het elke maand vir my die Wolfsklou-towerdrankie gemaak het, en dit perfek gemaak het, sodat ek nie met volmaan deur die gewone marteling hoef te gegaan het nie.”

“Maar hy het dit ‘per ongeluk’ laat val dat jy ’n weerwolf is en toe moes jy daar weggaan!” sê Harry kwaad.

Lupin haal sy skouers op.

“Die nuus sou in elk geval uitgelek het. Ons weet albei hy wou my pos hê, maar hy kon my baie skade aangedoen het as hy met die Towerdrankie gepeuter het. Hy het my gesond gehou. Ek moet dankbaar daarvoor wees.”

“Miskien het hy dit nie durf waag om met die Towerdrankie te lol nie omdat hy geweet het Dumbledore hou hom dop!” sê Harry.

“Jy is vasbeslote om hom te haat, Harry,” sê Lupin met ’n effense glimlag. “En ek kan dit verstaan; met James as jou pa en Sirius as jou peetpa het jy ’n ou vooroordeel geërf. Vertel gerus vir Dumbledore wat jy vir my en Arthur vertel het, maar moenie verwag dat hy jou mening oor die saak gaan deel nie; moenie eens verwag dat hy verras gaan wees oor wat jy hom vertel nie. Severus het Draco dalk op Dumbledore se bevel ondervra.”

*“... maar nou’s my hart aan flarde geskeur
En ek gaan my morsdood oor jou treur!”*

Celestina se liedjie eindig op 'n baie lang en baie hoë noot; daar kom dawerende applous by die radio uit en mevrou Weasley doen entoesiasties mee.

“Is dit nou verby?” vra Fleur hard. “Dankie tog, wat 'n aaklige –”

“Wat van 'n nagsopie?” vra meneer Weasley hard en kom haastig op die been. “Wie's lus vir eierbrandewyn?”

“Wat doen jy deesdae?” vra Harry vir Lupin terwyl meneer Weasley verdwyn om die eierbrandewyn te gaan haal en al die ander hulle uitrek en begin gesels.

“O, ek was ondergronds,” sê Lupin. “Amper letterlik. Dis hoekom ek nie vir jou kon skryf nie, Harry; as ek vir jou briewe gestuur het, sou ek die aap uit die mou gelaat het.”

“Wat bedoel jy?”

“Ek het saam met my soort, my eweknieë, gebly,” sê Lupin. “Weerwolwe,” voeg hy by toe Harry hom vraend aankyk. “Amper almal van hulle is aan Voldemort se kant. Dumbledore het 'n spioen gesoek en ek was ... nommerpas.”

Hy klink 'n bietjie bitter en besef dit moontlik, want hy glimlag vriendeliker toe hy aangaan. “Ek kla nie; dis werk wat gedoen moet word en wie kan dit beter as ek doen? Nogtans, dit was moeilik om hul vertrouwe te wen. Ek dra die onmiskenbare tekens van iemand wat saam met towenaars probeer lewe het, sien jy, terwyl hulle die normale samelewing vermy en as randfigure lewe; hulle steel – en maak soms dood – om te kan eet.”

“Hoekom hou hulle van Voldemort?”

“Hulle dink hulle sal 'n beter lewe onder sy heerskappy kan hê,” sê Lupin. “En dit is moeilik om hulle anders te oortuig met Greyback in die omgewing ...”

“Wie's Greyback?”

“Het jy nog nie van hom gehoor nie?” Lupin se hande trek krampagtig in sy skoot saam. “Fenrir Greyback is moontlik die wreedste weerwolf wat daar vandag lewe. Hy beskou dit as sy lewensroeping om soveel moontlik mense te besmet; hy wil genoeg weerwolwe skep om die oorhand oor towenaars te kan kry. Voldemort het hom prooi in ruil vir sy dienste belowe. Greyback spesialiseer in kinders ... byt hulle jonk, sê hy, en maak hulle weg van hul ouers af groot; leer hulle om gewone towenaars te haat. Voldemort het gedreig om hom op mense se seuns en dogters los te laat; dit is 'n dreigement wat gewoonlik goeie resultate oplewer.”

Lupin bly vir 'n oomblik stil en sê dan: “Dis Greyback wat my gebyt het.”

“Wat?” sê Harry verbaas. “Jy bedoel toe – toe jy 'n kind was?”

“Ja. My pa het hom aanstoot gegee. Ek het jare lank nie geweet wie die weerwolf was wat my gebyt het nie; ek het hom selfs jammer gekry, want ek het gedink hy het geen beheer daaroor gehad nie, omdat ek teen daardie tyd al geweet het hoe dit voel om te transformeer. Maar Greyback is nie so nie. Hy sorg dat hy met volmaan naby sy slagoffers is en maak seker hy kan dadelik toeslaan. Hy beplan alles haarfyn. En dit is die man wat Voldemort gebruik om die weerwolwe aan te voer. Ek kan ongelukkig nie voorgee dat my spesifieke manier van redelike argumentvoering veel vermag teen Greyback wat volhou dat ons weerwolwe bloed verdien en dat ons ons op normale mense moet wreek nie.”

“Maar jy’s normaal!” sê Harry vurig. “Jy het net ’n – ’n probleem –”
Lupin bars uit van die lag.

“Soms herinner jy my baie aan James. Hy het dit in geselskap ‘my harige probleempie’ genoem. Baie mense het gedink ek het ’n konyn wat hom sleg gedra.”

Hy aanvaar ’n glas eierbrandewyn van meneer Weasley, sê dankie en lyk ietwat vroliker. Intussen voel Harry die opwinding in hom opstoot: Toe Lupin van sy pa praat, het hy skielik onthou daar is iets wat hy lankal brand om hom te vra.

“Al ooit gehoor van iemand wat homself die Halfbloed Prins noem?”

“Die Halfbloed wat?”

“Prins,” sê Harry en hou hom fyn dop om te sien of hy enige tekens van herkenning toon.

“Daar is nie towenaarprinse nie,” sê Lupin wat nou weer glimlag. “Is dit ’n titel wat jy graag vir jouself wil hê? Ek sou dink die ‘Uitverkorene’ is goed genoeg.”

“Dit het niks met my te doen nie!” sê Harry verontwaardig. “Die Halfbloed Prins is iemand wat eens op ’n tyd in Hogwarts was; ek het sy ou Towerdrankieboek. Hy’t oral daarin towerspreuke neergeskryf; towerspreuke wat hy uitgedink het. Een van hulle is *Levicorpus* –”

“O, daai een was hoogmode toe ek in Hogwarts was,” sê Lupin en dink ver terug. “Daar was ’n paar maande in my vyfde jaar toe jy skaars jou een voet voor die ander kon sit of jy word aan jou enkel in die lug opgeheys.”

“My pa het dit gebruik,” sê Harry. “Ek het hom in die Peinssif gesien. Hy het dit op Snape gebruik.”

Hy probeer ongeërg klink, asof dit net ’n terloopse opmerking van geen werklike belang is nie, maar hy is nie seker hy het dit reggekry nie, want Lupin se glimlag is ’n bietjie té begrypend.

“Ja,” sê hy, “maar hy was nie die enigste een nie. Soos ek sê, dit was baie gewild ... Jy weet hoe towerspreuke kom en gaan ...”

“Maar dit klink of dit uitgedink is toe julle op skool was,” hou Harry vol.

“Nie noodwendig nie,” sê Lupin. “Paljasse gaan in en uit die mode, nes enigiets anders.” Hy kyk in Harry se oë en sê dan sag: “James was ’n suiwerbloeder, Harry, en ek belowe jou, hy het ons nooit gevra om hom ‘Prins’ te noem nie.”

Harry wys sy nuuskierigheid nou openlik en sê: “En dit was nie Sirius nie? Of jy dalk?”

“Beslis nie.”

“O.” Harry staar in die vuur. “Ek het net gedink – Wel, hy, ek bedoel die Prins, het my al baie in Towerdrankieklasse gehelp.”

“Hoe oud is hierdie boek, Harry?”

“Weet nie; ek het nog nie gekyk nie.”

“Wel, miskien sal dit jou ’n leidraad gee oor wanneer die Prins in Hogwarts was,” sê Lupin.

Kort daarna besluit Fleur om Celestina se weergawe van “’n Ketel Stomende, Sterk Liefde” na te maak en ná hulle vinnig vir mevrou Weasley geloer het, besluit almal dit is ’n teken dat hulle bed toe moet gaan. Harry en Ron klim op na Ron se solderkamer waar daar ’n kampbed vir Harry ingedra is.

Ron raak byna dadelik aan die slaap, maar Harry krap in sy trommel rond en haal sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* uit voor hy in die bed klim. Dan blaai hy deur die boek en soek tot hy uiteindelik heel voorin die datum kry waarop dit gepubliseer is. Dit is al amper vyftig jaar oud. Sy pa en sy pa se vriende was nie vyftig jaar gelede in Hogwarts nie. Harry gooi die boek teleurgesteld terug in sy trommel, doof die lamp uit en rol om terwyl hy wonder oor weerwolwe en Snape, Stan Shunpike en die Halfbloed Prins tot hy uiteindelik aan die slaap raak en droom van grillerige skadu’s en gillende kinders wat gebyt is ...

“Sy speel seker ...”

Harry skrik wakker en ontdek ’n volgestopte Kerskous aan sy bed se voetenent. Hy sit sy bril op en kyk rond; die klein venstertjie is amper heeltemal toegesneeu en voor dit sit Ron kiertsregop in die bed en kyk na iets wat soos ’n dik goue ketting lyk.

“Wat’s dit?” vra Harry.

“Dis van Lavender,” sê Ron en klink gewalg. “Hoe kan sy dink ek sal so iets dra?”

Harry kom nader en gil van die lag. Daar hang groot goue letters aan die ketting; hulle spel die woorde “My Liefling”.

“Oulik,” sê hy. “Smaakvol. Jy moet dit definitief voor Fred en George dra.”

“As jy vir hulle vertel,” sê Ron en steek die hangertjie dadelik onder sy kussing weg, “dan – dan – dan –”

“Dan gaan jy hakkel?” spot Harry en grinnik. “Komaan, sal ek nou ooit?”

“Maar hoe kan sy dink ek sal so iets dra?” vra Ron terwyl hy geskok voor hom uitstaar.

“Dink bietjie terug,” sê Harry. “Het jy ooit laat val dat jy met die woorde “My Liefing” om jou nek in die openbaar sal verskyn?”

“Wel ... ons praat nie eintlik veel nie,” sê Ron. “Ons ...”

“Vry net,” sê Harry.

“Wel, ja,” sê Ron. Hy huiwer vir ’n oomblik en vra dan: “Gaan Hermione regtig met McLaggen uit?”

“Ek weet nie,” sê Harry. “Hulle was saam by Slughorn se partytjie, maar ek dink nie dit het so goed gegaan nie.”

Ron lyk effens vroliker en delf dieper in sy Kerskous.

Harry se presente is onder andere ’n handgebreide trui van mevrou Weasley met ’n yslike Goue Snip daarop uitgewerk, ’n groot boks vol Weasleys se Wonderpoetsprodukte van die tweeling en ’n effense klam pakkie wat muwwerig ruik en waarop daar ’n etiket is wat sê: “Aan Meester, van Skepsel.”

Harry bekyk dit. “Dink jy dis veilig om dit oop te maak?” vra hy.

“Kan nie iets gevaarliks wees nie, want al ons pos word nog steeds by die Ministerie deursoek,” antwoord Ron al kyk hy ook agterdogtig na die pakkie.

“Ek het nie daaraan gedink om vir Skepsel iets te gee nie. Gee mense gewoonlik vir hul huiselwe Kerspresente?” vra Harry en voel versigtig aan die pakkie.

“Hermione sal,” sê Ron. “Maar kom ons wag en kyk wat dit is voor jy begin skuldig voel.”

’n Oomblik later gee Harry ’n harde gil en spring uit sy kampbed; daar peul ’n klomp wurms uit die pakkie.

“Oulik,” sê Ron en brul van die lag. “Baie bedagsaam.”

“Ek vat dit eerder as daai hangertjie,” sê Harry en Ron sluk dadelik sy lag.

Almal dra nuwe truie toe hulle vir die Kersmiddagmaal aansit, almal behalwe Fleur (op wie mevrou Weasley klaarblyklik nie een wou vermors nie) en mevrou Weasley self wat spog met ’n splinternuwe middernagblou hekshoed wat glinster met wat soos klein sterretjiediamante lyk en ’n asemrowende goue halssnoer.

“Fred en George het dit vir my gegee. Is dit nie pragtig nie?”

“Wel, ons waardeer Ma al hoe meer nou dat ons ons eie sokkies moet was,” sê George en waai ongeërg sy hand. “Witwortels, Remus?”

“Harry, daar’s ’n wurm in jou hare,” sê Ginny uitgelate en leun oor die tafel om dit uit te haal; Harry voel hoe sy nek hoendervleis raak en hy weet dit het niks met die wurm te doen nie.

“Oe, aaklig!” sê Fleur en ril aansitterig.

“Ja, nogal, nè?” sê Ron. “Sous, Fleur?”

In sy gretigheid om haar te help, stamp hy die souskommetjie dat dit dáár trek; Bill swaai sy towerstaf en die sous vlieg in die lug op en beland weer veilig terug in die kommetjie.

“Jy is so erg soos daai Tonks,” sê Fleur vir Ron ná sy Bill dankie gesoen het. “Sy stamp mos altyd alles om –”

“Ek het liefste Tonks vir vandag oorgenooi,” sê mevrou Weasley terwyl sy die wortels onnodig hard neersit en Fleur aanguur. “Maar sy kon nie kom nie. Het jy onlangs met haar gepraat, Remus?”

“Nee, ek was nie eintlik met enigiemand in verbinding nie,” sê Lupin. “Maar Tonks het mos haar eie familie om na toe te gaan, of hoe?”

“Hmmm,” sê mevrou Weasley. “Miskien. Maar ek het die idee gekry sy beplan om Kersfees alleen deur te bring.”

Sy kyk Lupin vies aan asof dit alles sy skuld is dat sy Fleur as ’n skoondogter gaan kry pleks van Tonks, maar Harry sien hoe Fleur Bill stukkies kalkoen met haar vurk voer en besluit mevrou Weasley voer ’n stryd wat sy lankal reeds verloor het. Hy onthou egter iets van Tonks waaroor hy lankal wonder, en wie is beter om te vra as Lupin, die man wat alles van Patronusse af weet?

“Tonks se Patronus het van vorm verander,” sê Harry vir hom. “In elk geval, dis wat Snape gesê het. Ek het nie geweet dit kan gebeur nie. Hoekom verander iemand se Patronus?”

Lupin kou sy happie kalkoen tydsam klaar en sluk dit eers in voor hy stadig antwoord: “Somtyds ... kry iemand ’n groot skok ... of dis iets emosioneels ...”

“Dit was groot en het vier bene gehad,” sê Harry, wat skielik aan iets dink en sy stem laat sak. “Hei ... kon dit nie dalk –?”

“Arthur!” sê mevrou Weasley skielik. Sy spring uit haar stoel op, druk haar hand teen haar hart vas en staar by die kombuisvenster uit. “Arthur – dis Percy!”

“Wat?”

Meneer Weasley swaai om. Almal kyk dadelik venster toe; Ginny staan op om beter te kan sien. En sowaar, daar kom Percy Weasley oor die toegesneeude werf aangeloop met sy horinggraambрил wat in die sonlig glinster. Maar hy is nie alleen nie.

“Arthur, hy – hy’t die Minister by hom!”

En jou waarlik, die man wat Harry in die *Daaglikse Profeet* gesien het, volg kort op Percy se hakke; hy loop effens mank en sy ampergrys hare en swart mantel is vol sneeuvlokkies. Voor enigeen van hulle iets kan sê, voor meneer en mevrou Weasley meer kan doen as om mekaar verstom aan te kyk, gaan die agterdeur oop en daar staan Percy.

Daar is ’n oomblik van pynlike stilte. Dan sê Percy taamlik styf: “Geseënde Kersfees, Moeder.”

“O, Percy!” sê mevrou Weasley en werp haarself in sy arms.

Rufus Scrimgeour huiwer by die deur, leun op sy kiere en glimlag terwyl hy hierdie aandoenlike toneel gadeslaan.

“Vergewe ons dat ons so ongenooïd hier aankom,” sê hy toe mevrou Weasley stralend na hom omkyk en haar oë afvee, “ek en Percy was hier in die omgewing – werk, natuurlik – en toe *moes* hy eenvoudig net gou kom inloer om julle almal te sien.”

Maar Percy toon geen teken dat hy enigeen van die res van die gesin wil groet nie. Hy staan daar, penregop en ongemaklik, en staar oor almal se koppe heen. Meneer Weasley, Fred en George kyk hom uitdrukkingloos aan.

“Kom in, asseblief, kom sit, Minister!” nooi mevrou Weasley verbouereerd en druk haar hoed regop. “Wat van ’n bietjie palpoen, of ’n skeppie koeding ... Ek bedoel –”

“Nee, nee, my liewe Molly,” sê Scrimgeour. Harry weet sommer hy het by Percy seker gemaak wat haar naam is voor hulle by die huis ingekom het. “Ek wil nie inbreuk maak op julle tyd nie en ek sou ook nie as Percy julle almal nie so verskriklik graag wou sien nie ...”

“O, Perce!” sê mevrou Weasley tranerig en mik ’n soen in sy rigting.

“... Ons het net vyf minute, so ek sal buite op die werf rondstap terwyl julle en Percy nuus uitruil. Ek wil nie op julle privaatheid inbreuk maak nie. Dus, as iemand vir my kan wys waar julle sjar-mante tuin is ... A, daardie jong man het klaar geëet; hoekom kom hy nie saam met my stap nie?”

Die atmosfeer om die tafel verander voelbaar. Almal kyk van Scrimgeour na Harry. Dit lyk of Scrimgeour niemand oortuig dat hy nie weet wat Harry se naam is nie, en hoekom word juis Harry gekies om saam met die Minister in die tuin te gaan stap as Ginny, Fleur en George se borde ook leeg geëet is?

“Ja, reg,” verbreek Harry die stilte.

Hy is egter nie gefop nie. Scrimgeour sê nou wel hulle was toe-

vallig in die omgewing en dat Percy sy familie wou kom groet, maar die regte rede hoekom hulle hier is, is sodat Scrimgeour alleen met Harry kan praat.

“Dis als reg,” sê hy stil en beweeg verby Lupin wat uit sy stoel begin opkom. “Als reg,” sê hy weer toe meneer Weasley sy mond oopmaak om te praat.

“Wonderlik!” sê Scrimgeour en staan terug sodat Harry voor hom by die deur kan uitgaan. “Ons sal net ’n draaitjie deur die tuin stap en dan sal ek en Percy weer die pad vat. Gaan gerus voort, almal!”

Harry loop oor die werf na die Weasleys se toegegroeide, sneeu-bedekte tuin met Scrimgeour wat langs hom hinkepink. Harry weet hy was vroeër Hoof van die Aurorkantoor; hy lyk taai en het letsels wat van hewige gevegte getuig; baie anders as die plomp Fudge met sy bolhoedjie.

“Sjarmant,” sê Scrimgeour. Hy stop by die heining en kyk uit oor die witgesneeu-de grasperk en die onherkenbare plante. “Sjarmant.”

Harry sê niks. Hy weet Scrimgeour hou hom dop.

“Ek wil jou al baie lankal ontmoet,” sê Scrimgeour ná ’n paar oomblikke. “Weet jy dit?”

“Nee,” sê Harry eerlik.

“O ja, al baie lankal. Maar Dumbledore is baie beskermend teen-oor jou,” sê Scrimgeour. “Dis te verstane, natuurlik, dis te verstane ná alles wat jy deurgemaak het ... veral ná wat by die Ministerie gebeur het ...”

Hy wag dat Harry iets moet sê, maar Harry doen dit nie en daarom gaan hy aan: “Vandat ek my nuwe amp beklee, wag ek al vir ’n geleentheid om met jou te gesels, maar Dumbledore het – heel verstaanbaar, soos ek reeds gesê het – dit onmoontlik gemaak.”

Harry sê nog steeds niks nie; hy wag.

“Die vreemdste gerugte doen die rondel!” sê Scrimgeour. “Wel, ons weet natuurlik albei hoe stories uit verband geruk word ... al die gefluister oor ’n profesie ... oor jou wat die ‘Uitverkorene’ is ...”

Hulle is nou amper daar, dink Harry, amper by die rede hoekom Scrimgeour hier is.

“... Ek veronderstel Dumbledore het hierdie aangeleenthede met jou bespreek?”

Harry dink na en wonder of hy moet jok of nie. Hy kyk na die kabouterspoortjies oral in die blombeddings en die modderige kol waar Fred die tuinkabouter wat nou met ’n balletrokkie aan bo-op die Kersboom sit, gevang het. Uiteindelik besluit hy om die waarheid te praat ... of gedeeltelik.

“Ja, ons het dit bespreek.”

“A, julle hét, julle hét ...” sê Scrimgeour. Harry sien uit die hoek van sy oog hoe Scrimgeour vir hom loer en maak of hy baie geïnteresseerd is in ’n kabouter wat nou net sy kop onder ’n bevrore rododendron uitgesteek het. “En wat het Dumbledore jou vertel, Harry?”

“Jammer, maar dis tussen ons,” sê Harry.

Hy hou sy stem so vriendelik moontlik en Scrimgeour se stemtoon is ook lig en aangenaam wanneer hy sê: “O, natuurlik, as dit vertroulik is, sal ek die laaste een wees om jou te vra om dit openbaar te maak ... Nee, nee ... en in elk geval, maak dit regtig saak of jy die Uitverkorene is of nie?”

Harry dink ’n paar sekondes hieroor na voor hy antwoord.

“Ek verstaan nie regtig wat u bedoel nie, Minister.”

“Wel, dit maak vir jou baie saak,” sê Scrimgeour met ’n laggie. “Maar vir die towenaarswêreld as ’n geheel ... Dis alles net persepsie, is dit nie? Wat mense glo, is wat belangrik is.”

Harry sê niks. Hy dink hy weet so vaagweg waarheen hulle op pad is, maar hy gaan Scrimgeour nie help om daar uit te kom nie. Die kabouter onder die rododendron grawe nou by die wortels rond op soek na wurms en Harry hou sy oë stip op hom.

“Jy sien, mense dink jy is die Uitverkorene,” sê Scrimgeour. “Hulle beskou jou as ’n held – wat jy natuurlik is, Harry, uitverkore ofte nie! Hoeveel keer het jy Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie nou al getrotseer? Nietemin,” gaan hy aan sonder om vir ’n antwoord te wag, “die punt is, jy is vir baie mense ’n simbool van hoop, Harry. Die idee van iemand daar buite wat dalk in staat is, dalk *bestem* is om Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie te vernietig – wel, natuurlik gee dit mense moed. En ek kan nie help om te voel dat sodra jy dit begin insien jy dit sal oorweeg, dit selfs as jou plig sal beskou, om jou by die Ministerie te skaar en almal nuwe hoop en moed te gee nie.”

Die kabouter het so pas ’n wurm beetgekry. Hy pluk nou hard daaraan en probeer dit uit die bevrore grond trek. Harry bly só lank stil dat Scrimgeour van hom na die kabouter kyk en dan sê: “Snaakse kêreltjies, is hulle nie? Maar wat sê jy, Harry?”

“Ek verstaan nie wat presies u wil hê nie,” sê Harry stadig. “My by die Ministerie skaar’ ... Wat beteken dit?”

“O wel, hoegenaamd niks veeleisends nie, ek verseker jou,” sê Scrimgeour. “As mense jou byvoorbeeld van tyd tot tyd by die Ministerie sou sien in- en uitgaan, sal dit die regte indruk skep. En terwyl jy daar is, sal jy natuurlik meer as genoeg geleentheid kry om

met Gawain Robards, my opvolger as Hoof van die Aurorkantoor, te gesels. Dolores Umbridge het my vertel jy koester die ambisie om eendag 'n Auror te word. Wel, dit kan maklik gereël word ...”

Harry voel hoe die woede op die krop van sy maag begin borrel: dan is Dolores Umbridge nog steeds by die Ministerie?

“So basies,” sê hy asof hy net oor 'n paar sakies duidelikheid wil kry, “wil u die indruk skep dat ek vir die Ministerie werk?”

“Dit sal almal beter laat voel as hulle dink jy is meer betrokke, Harry,” sê Scrimgeour en klink verlig dat Harry so vlug van begrip is. “Jy is die ‘Uitverkorene’, onthou ... Jy moet mense weer hoop gee; hulle laat voel daar gebeur opwindende dinge ...”

“Maar as ek heeltyd by die Ministerie in- en uithardloop,” sê Harry en probeer sy stem nog steeds vriendelik hou, “sal dit mos lyk of ek dit wat die Ministerie doen alles goedkeur?”

“Wel,” sê Scrimgeour met 'n effense frons, “wel, ja, dit is deels wat ons graag –”

“Nee, ek dink nie dit sal werk nie,” sê Harry beleefd. “Sien u, ek hou nie van party van die dinge wat die Ministerie doen nie. Soos byvoorbeeld om Stan Shunpike op te sluit.”

Scrimgeour sê vir 'n oomblik niks nie, maar sy uitdrukking verhard oombliklik.

“Ek verwag nie begrip van jou nie,” sê hy en kry dit nie so goed soos Harry reg om die woede uit sy stem te hou nie. “Ons lewe in gevaarlike tye, en sekere stappe moet geneem word. Jy is net sestien jaar oud –”

“Dumbledore is baie ouer as sestien en hy dink ook nie Stan hoort in Azkaban nie,” sê Harry. “U maak van Stan 'n sondebok, net soos wat u my 'n gelukbringer wil maak.”

Hulle kyk lank en stip na mekaar. Uiteindelik sê Scrimgeour sonder om gemoedelik te probeer klink: “Ek sien. Jy verkies dus – net soos jou held Dumbledore – om jou van die Ministerie te distansieer?”

“Ek wil nie gebruik word nie,” sê Harry.

“Party mense sal sê dis jou plig om toe te laat dat die Ministerie jou gebruik!”

“Ja, en ander sal sê dis u plig om seker te maak mense is Doodseters voor u hulle tronk toe stuur,” sê Harry wie se humeur nou begin opvlam. “U doen wat Barty Crouch gedoen het. Die Ministerie doen nooit iets reg nie. Ons het óf vir Fudge wat maak of alles oukei is terwyl mense reg onder sy neus vermoor word, óf vir u wat die verkeerde mense in die tronk smyt en probeer maak of die Uitverkorene vir u werk!”

“So jy is nie die Uitverkorene nie?” vra Scrimgeour.

“Ek dog u het gesê dit maak in elk geval nie saak nie?” sê Harry en lag bitter. “Altans nie vir u nie.”

“Ek moes dit nie gesê het nie,” sê Scrimgeour vinnig. “Dit was taktloos –”

“Nee, dit was eerlik,” sê Harry. “Een van die enigste eerlike dinge wat u gesê het. U gee nie om of ek lewe of doodgaan nie, maar u gee om dat ek u moet help om almal te oortuig u wen hierdie oorlog teen Voldemort. Ek het nie vergeet nie, Minister ...”

Hy lig sy regtervuur. En daar, blinkwit agterop sy koue hand sit die littekens waar Dolores Umbridge hom gedwing het om homself stukkend te sny sodat hy in sy eie bloed kon uitskryf: *Ek mag nie leuens vertel nie.*

“Ek kan nie onthou dat u my probeer verdedig het toe ek vir almal gesê het Voldemort is terug nie. Die Ministerie was nie laas jaar so gretig om pëlle met my te wees nie.”

Hulle staan in 'n stilte so ysig soos die grond onder hul voete. Die kabouter het die wurm uiteindelik uitgetrek gekry en suig hom nou heerlik uit terwyl hy teen die rododendronbos se onderste takke leun.

“Wat voer Dumbledore in die mou?” vra Scrimgeour kortaf. “Waarheen gaan hy wanneer hy nie by Hogwarts is nie?”

“G'n idee nie,” sê Harry.

“En as jy geweet het, sou jy my nie gesê het nie,” sê Scrimgeour, “sou jy?”

“Nee, ek sou nie,” antwoord Harry.

“Nou ja, dan sal ek maar moet kyk of ek op 'n ander manier kan uitvind.”

“U kan probeer,” sê Harry onverskillig. “Maar u lyk slimmer as Fudge, so ek het gedink u sal uit sy foute leer. Hy het by Hogwarts probeer inneng. U het dalk agtergekom hy is nie meer 'n Minister nie, maar Dumbledore is nog steeds ons Skoolhoof. As ek u is, sal ek Dumbledore uitlos.”

Daar is 'n lang pouse.

“Wel, dis vir my duidelik dat hy hom goed van sy taak gekwyt het met jou,” sê Scrimgeour en sy oë is koud en hard agter sy draadraambuil. “Jy's deur en deur Dumbledore se man, nê, Potter?”

“Ja, ek is,” sê Harry. “Ek is bly u weet dit nou.”

En daarmee draai hy sy rug op die Minister van Towerkuns en loop terug na die huis.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



A SLUGGISH MEMORY

Late in the afternoon, a few days after New Year, Harry, Ron, and Ginny lined up beside the kitchen fire to return to Hogwarts. The Ministry had arranged this one-off connection to the Floo Network to return students quickly and safely to the school. Only Mrs. Weasley was there to say good-bye, as Mr. Weasley, Fred, George, Bill, and Fleur were all at work. Mrs. Weasley dissolved into tears at the moment of parting. Admittedly, it took very little to set her off lately; she had been crying on and off ever since Percy had stormed from the house on Christmas Day with his glasses splattered with mashed parsnip (for which Fred, George, and Ginny all claimed credit).

“Don’t cry, Mum,” said Ginny, patting her on the back as Mrs. Weasley sobbed into her shoulder. “It’s okay. . . .”

“Yeah, don’t worry about us,” said Ron, permitting his mother to plant a very wet kiss on his cheek, “or about Percy. He’s such a prat, it’s not really a loss, is it?”

Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever as she enfolded Harry in her arms.

“Promise me you’ll look after yourself. . . . Stay out of trouble. . . .”

“I always do, Mrs. Weasley,” said Harry. “I like a quiet life, you know me.”

She gave a watery chuckle and stood back. “Be good, then, all of you. . . .”

Harry stepped into the emerald fire and shouted “Hogwarts!” He had one last fleeting view of the Weasleys’ kitchen and Mrs. Weasley’s tearful face before the flames engulfed him; spinning very fast, he caught blurred glimpses of other Wizarding rooms, which were whipped out of sight before he could get a proper look; then he was slowing down, finally stopping squarely in the fireplace in Professor McGonagall’s office. She barely glanced up from her work as he clambered out over the grate.

“Evening, Potter. Try not to get too much ash on the carpet.”

“No, Professor.”

Harry straightened his glasses and flattened his hair as Ron came spinning into view. When Ginny had arrived, all three of them trooped out of McGonagall’s office and off toward Gryffindor Tower. Harry glanced out of the corridor windows as they passed;

the sun was already sinking over grounds carpeted in deeper snow than had lain over the Burrow garden. In the distance, he could see Hagrid feeding Buckbeak in front of his cabin.

“Baubles,” said Ron confidently, when they reached the Fat Lady, who was looking rather paler than usual and winced at his loud voice.

“No,” she said.

“What d’you mean, ‘no’?”

“There is a new password,” she said. “And please don’t shout.”

“But we’ve been away, how’re we supposed to — ?”

“Harry! Ginny!”

Hermione was hurrying toward them, very pink-faced and wearing a cloak, hat, and gloves.

“I got back a couple of hours ago, I’ve just been down to visit Hagrid and Buck — I mean Witherwings,” she said breathlessly. “Did you have a good Christmas?”

“Yeah,” said Ron at once, “pretty eventful, Rufus Scrim —”

“I’ve got something for you, Harry,” said Hermione, neither looking at Ron nor giving any sign that she had heard him. “Oh, hang on — password. *Abstinence*.”

“Precisely,” said the Fat Lady in a feeble voice, and swung forward to reveal the portrait hole.

“What’s up with her?” asked Harry.

“Overindulged over Christmas, apparently,” said Hermione, rolling her eyes as she led the way into the packed common room. “She and her friend Violet drank their way through all the wine in that picture of drunk monks down by the Charms corridor. Anyway . . .”

She rummaged in her pocket for a moment, then pulled out a scroll of parchment with Dumbledore's writing on it.

"Great," said Harry, unrolling it at once to discover that his next lesson with Dumbledore was scheduled for the following night. "I've got loads to tell him — and you. Let's sit down —"

But at that moment there was a loud squeal of "Won-Won!" and Lavender Brown came hurtling out of nowhere and flung herself into Ron's arms. Several onlookers sniggered; Hermione gave a tinkling laugh and said, "There's a table over here. . . . Coming, Ginny?"

"No, thanks, I said I'd meet Dean," said Ginny, though Harry could not help noticing that she did not sound very enthusiastic. Leaving Ron and Lavender locked in a kind of vertical wrestling match, Harry led Hermione over to the spare table.

"So how was your Christmas?"

"Oh, fine," she shrugged. "Nothing special. How was it at Won-Won's?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," said Harry. "Look, Hermione, can't you — ?"

"No, I can't," she said flatly. "So don't even ask."

"I thought maybe, you know, over Christmas —"

"It was the Fat Lady who drank a vat of five-hundred-year-old wine, Harry, not me. So what was this important news you wanted to tell me?"

She looked too fierce to argue with at that moment, so Harry dropped the subject of Ron and recounted all that he had overheard between Malfoy and Snape. When he had finished, Hermione sat in thought for a moment and then said, "Don't you think — ?"

“— he was pretending to offer help so that he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he’s doing?”

“Well, yes,” said Hermione.

“Ron’s dad and Lupin think so,” Harry said grudgingly. “But this definitely proves Malfoy’s planning something, you can’t deny that.”

“No, I can’t,” she answered slowly.

“And he’s acting on Voldemort’s orders, just like I said!”

“Hmm . . . did either of them actually mention Voldemort’s name?”

Harry frowned, trying to remember. “I’m not sure . . . Snape definitely said ‘your master,’ and who else would that be?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione, biting her lip. “Maybe his father?”

She stared across the room, apparently lost in thought, not even noticing Lavender tickling Ron. “How’s Lupin?”

“Not great,” said Harry, and he told her all about Lupin’s mission among the werewolves and the difficulties he was facing. “Have you heard of this Fenrir Greyback?”

“Yes, I have!” said Hermione, sounding startled. “And so have you, Harry!”

“When, History of Magic? You know full well I never listened . . .”

“No, no, not History of Magic — Malfoy threatened Borgin with him!” said Hermione. “Back in Knockturn Alley, don’t you remember? He told Borgin that Greyback was an old family friend and that he’d be checking up on Borgin’s progress!”

Harry gaped at her. “I forgot! But this *proves* Malfoy’s a Death Eater, how else could he be in contact with Greyback and telling him what to do?”

“It is pretty suspicious,” breathed Hermione. “Unless . . .”

“Oh, come on,” said Harry in exasperation, “you can’t get round this one!”

“Well . . . there is the possibility it was an empty threat.”

“You’re unbelievable, you are,” said Harry, shaking his head. “We’ll see who’s right. . . . You’ll be eating your words, Hermione, just like the Ministry. Oh yeah, I had a row with Rufus Scrimgeour as well. . . .”

And the rest of the evening passed amicably with both of them abusing the Minister of Magic, for Hermione, like Ron, thought that after all the Ministry had put Harry through the previous year, they had a great deal of nerve asking him for help now.

The new term started next morning with a pleasant surprise for the sixth years: a large sign had been pinned to the common room notice boards overnight.

APPARITION LESSONS

If you are seventeen years of age, or will turn seventeen on or before the 31st August next, you are eligible for a twelve-week course of Apparition Lessons from a Ministry of Magic Apparition instructor. Please sign below if you would like to participate. Cost: 12 Galleons.

Harry and Ron joined the crowd that was jostling around the notice and taking it in turns to write their names at the bottom. Ron was just taking out his quill to sign after Hermione when Lavender crept up behind him, slipped her hands over his eyes, and trilled, “Guess who, Won-Won?” Harry turned to see Hermione stalking off;

he caught up with her, having no wish to stay behind with Ron and Lavender, but to his surprise, Ron caught up with them only a little way beyond the portrait hole, his ears bright red and his expression disgruntled. Without a word, Hermione sped up to walk with Neville.

“So — Apparition,” said Ron, his tone making it perfectly plain that Harry was not to mention what had just happened. “Should be a laugh, eh?”

“I dunno,” said Harry. “Maybe it’s better when you do it yourself, I didn’t enjoy it much when Dumbledore took me along for the ride.”

“I forgot you’d already done it. . . . I’d better pass my test first time,” said Ron, looking anxious. “Fred and George did.”

“Charlie failed, though, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, but Charlie’s bigger than me” — Ron held his arms out from his body as though he was a gorilla — “so Fred and George didn’t go on about it much . . . not to his face anyway . . .”

“When can we take the actual test?”

“Soon as we’re seventeen. That’s only March for me!”

“Yeah, but you wouldn’t be able to Apparate in here, not in the castle . . .”

“Not the point, is it? Everyone would know I *could* Apparate if I wanted.”

Ron was not the only one to be excited at the prospect of Apparition. All that day there was much talk about the forthcoming lessons; a great deal of store was set by being able to vanish and reappear at will.

“How cool will it be when we can just —” Seamus clicked his fingers to indicate disappearance. “Me cousin Fergus does it just to

annoy me, you wait till I can do it back . . . He'll never have another peaceful moment. . . .”

Lost in visions of this happy prospect, he flicked his wand a little too enthusiastically, so that instead of producing the fountain of pure water that was the object of today's Charms lesson, he let out a hoselike jet that ricocheted off the ceiling and knocked Professor Flitwick flat on his face.

“Harry's already Apparated,” Ron told a slightly abashed Seamus, after Professor Flitwick had dried himself off with a wave of his wand and set Seamus lines: “*I am a wizard, not a baboon brandishing a stick.*” “Dum — er — someone took him. Side-Along-Apparition, you know.”

“Whoa!” whispered Seamus, and he, Dean, and Neville put their heads a little closer to hear what Apparition felt like. For the rest of the day, Harry was besieged with requests from the other sixth years to describe the sensation of Apparition. All of them seemed awed, rather than put off, when he told them how uncomfortable it was, and he was still answering detailed questions at ten to eight that evening, when he was forced to lie and say that he needed to return a book to the library, so as to escape in time for his lesson with Dumbledore.

The lamps in Dumbledore's office were lit, the portraits of previous headmasters were snoring gently in their frames, and the Pensieve was ready upon the desk once more. Dumbledore's hands lay on either side of it, the right one as blackened and burnt-looking as ever. It did not seem to have healed at all and Harry wondered, for perhaps the hundredth time, what had caused such a distinctive injury, but did not ask; Dumbledore had said that he would know eventually

and there was, in any case, another subject he wanted to discuss. But before Harry could say anything about Snape and Malfoy, Dumbledore spoke.

“I hear that you met the Minister of Magic over Christmas?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “He’s not very happy with me.”

“No,” sighed Dumbledore. “He is not very happy with me either. We must try not to sink beneath our anguish, Harry, but battle on.”

Harry grinned.

“He wanted me to tell the Wizarding community that the Ministry’s doing a wonderful job.”

Dumbledore smiled.

“It was Fudge’s idea originally, you know. During his last days in office, when he was trying desperately to cling to his post, he sought a meeting with you, hoping that you would give him your support —”

“After everything Fudge did last year?” said Harry angrily. “After *Umbridge*?”

“I told Cornelius there was no chance of it, but the idea did not die when he left office. Within hours of Scrimgeour’s appointment we met and he demanded that I arrange a meeting with you —”

“So that’s why you argued!” Harry blurted out. “It was in the *Daily Prophet*.”

“The *Prophet* is bound to report the truth occasionally,” said Dumbledore, “if only accidentally. Yes, that was why we argued. Well, it appears that Rufus found a way to corner you at last.”

“He accused me of being ‘Dumbledore’s man through and through.’”

“How very rude of him.”

“I told him I was.”

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. Behind Harry, Fawkes the phoenix let out a low, soft, musical cry. To Harry’s intense embarrassment, he suddenly realized that Dumbledore’s bright blue eyes looked rather watery, and stared hastily at his own knees. When Dumbledore spoke, however, his voice was quite steady.

“I am very touched, Harry.”

“Scrimgeour wanted to know where you go when you’re not at Hogwarts,” said Harry, still looking fixedly at his knees.

“Yes, he is very nosy about that,” said Dumbledore, now sounding cheerful, and Harry thought it safe to look up again. “He has even attempted to have me followed. Amusing, really. He set Dawlish to tail me. It wasn’t kind. I have already been forced to jinx Dawlish once; I did it again with the greatest regret.”

“So they still don’t know where you go?” asked Harry, hoping for more information on this intriguing subject, but Dumbledore merely smiled over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

“No, they don’t, and the time is not quite right for you to know either. Now, I suggest we press on, unless there’s anything else — ?”

“There is, actually, sir,” said Harry. “It’s about Malfoy and Snape.”

“*Professor* Snape, Harry.”

“Yes, sir. I overheard them during Professor Slughorn’s party . . . well, I followed them, actually. . . .”

Dumbledore listened to Harry’s story with an impassive face. When Harry had finished he did not speak for a few moments, then

said, "Thank you for telling me this, Harry, but I suggest that you put it out of your mind. I do not think that it is of great importance."

"Not of great importance?" repeated Harry incredulously. "Professor, did you understand — ?"

"Yes, Harry, blessed as I am with extraordinary brainpower, I understood everything you told me," said Dumbledore, a little sharply. "I think you might even consider the possibility that I understood more than you did. Again, I am glad that you have confided in me, but let me reassure you that you have not told me anything that causes me disquiet."

Harry sat in seething silence, glaring at Dumbledore. What was going on? Did this mean that Dumbledore had indeed ordered Snape to find out what Malfoy was doing, in which case he had already heard everything Harry had just told him from Snape? Or was he really worried by what he had heard, but pretending not to be?

"So, sir," said Harry, in what he hoped was a polite, calm voice, "you definitely still trust — ?"

"I have been tolerant enough to answer that question already," said Dumbledore, but he did not sound very tolerant anymore. "My answer has not changed."

"I should think not," said a snide voice; Phineas Nigellus was evidently only pretending to be asleep. Dumbledore ignored him.

"And now, Harry, I must insist that we press on. I have more important things to discuss with you this evening."

Harry sat there feeling mutinous. How would it be if he refused to permit the change of subject, if he insisted upon arguing the case against Malfoy? As though he had read Harry's mind, Dumbledore

shook his head.

“Ah, Harry, how often this happens, even between the best of friends! Each of us believes that what he has to say is much more important than anything the other might have to contribute!”

“I don’t think what you’ve got to say is unimportant, sir,” said Harry stiffly.

“Well, you are quite right, because it is not,” said Dumbledore briskly. “I have two more memories to show you this evening, both obtained with enormous difficulty, and the second of them is, I think, the most important I have collected.”

Harry did not say anything to this; he still felt angry at the reception his confidences had received, but could not see what was to be gained by arguing further.

“So,” said Dumbledore, in a ringing voice, “we meet this evening to continue the tale of Tom Riddle, whom we left last lesson poised on the threshold of his years at Hogwarts. You will remember how excited he was to hear that he was a wizard, that he refused my company on a trip to Diagon Alley, and that I, in turn, warned him against continued thievery when he arrived at school.

“Well, the start of the school year arrived and with it came Tom Riddle, a quiet boy in his secondhand robes, who lined up with the other first years to be sorted. He was placed in Slytherin House almost the moment that the Sorting Hat touched his head,” continued Dumbledore, waving his blackened hand toward the shelf over his head where the Sorting Hat sat, ancient and unmoving. “How soon Riddle learned that the famous founder of the House could talk to snakes, I do not know — perhaps that very evening. The knowledge

can only have excited him and increased his sense of self-importance.

“However, if he was frightening or impressing fellow Slytherins with displays of Parseltongue in their common room, no hint of it reached the staff. He showed no sign of outward arrogance or aggression at all. As an unusually talented and very good-looking orphan, he naturally drew attention and sympathy from the staff almost from the moment of his arrival. He seemed polite, quiet, and thirsty for knowledge. Nearly all were most favorably impressed by him.”

“Didn’t you tell them, sir, what he’d been like when you met him at the orphanage?” asked Harry.

“No, I did not. Though he had shown no hint of remorse, it was possible that he felt sorry for how he had behaved before and was resolved to turn over a fresh leaf. I chose to give him that chance.”

Dumbledore paused and looked inquiringly at Harry, who had opened his mouth to speak. Here, again, was Dumbledore’s tendency to trust people in spite of overwhelming evidence that they did not deserve it! But then Harry remembered something. . . .

“But you didn’t *really* trust him, sir, did you? He told me . . . the Riddle who came out of that diary said, ‘Dumbledore never seemed to like me as much as the other teachers did.’”

“Let us say that I did not take it for granted that he was trustworthy,” said Dumbledore. “I had, as I have already indicated, resolved to keep a close eye upon him, and so I did. I cannot pretend that I gleaned a great deal from my observations at first. He was very guarded with me; he felt, I am sure, that in the thrill of discovering

his true identity he had told me a little too much. He was careful never to reveal as much again, but he could not take back what he had let slip in his excitement, nor what Mrs. Cole had confided in me. However, he had the sense never to try and charm me as he charmed so many of my colleagues.

“As he moved up the school, he gathered about him a group of dedicated friends; I call them that, for want of a better term, although as I have already indicated, Riddle undoubtedly felt no affection for any of them. This group had a kind of dark glamour within the castle. They were a motley collection; a mixture of the weak seeking protection, the ambitious seeking some shared glory, and the thuggish gravitating toward a leader who could show them more refined forms of cruelty. In other words, they were the forerunners of the Death Eaters, and indeed some of them became the first Death Eaters after leaving Hogwarts.

“Rigidly controlled by Riddle, they were never detected in open wrongdoing, although their seven years at Hogwarts were marked by a number of nasty incidents to which they were never satisfactorily linked, the most serious of which was, of course, the opening of the Chamber of Secrets, which resulted in the death of a girl. As you know, Hagrid was wrongly accused of that crime.

“I have not been able to find many memories of Riddle at Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore, placing his withered hand on the Pensieve. “Few who knew him then are prepared to talk about him; they are too terrified. What I know, I found out after he had left Hogwarts, after much painstaking effort, after tracing those few who could be tricked into speaking, after searching old records and

questioning Muggle and wizard witnesses alike.

“Those whom I could persuade to talk told me that Riddle was obsessed with his parentage. This is understandable, of course; he had grown up in an orphanage and naturally wished to know how he came to be there. It seems that he searched in vain for some trace of Tom Riddle senior on the shields in the trophy room, on the lists of prefects in the old school records, even in the books of Wizarding history. Finally he was forced to accept that his father had never set foot in Hogwarts. I believe that it was then that he dropped the name forever, assumed the identity of Lord Voldemort, and began his investigations into his previously despised mother’s family — the woman whom, you will remember, he had thought could not be a witch if she had succumbed to the shameful human weakness of death.

“All he had to go upon was the single name ‘Marvolo,’ which he knew from those who ran the orphanage had been his mother’s father’s name. Finally, after painstaking research through old books of Wizarding families, he discovered the existence of Slytherin’s surviving line. In the summer of his sixteenth year, he left the orphanage to which he returned annually and set off to find his Gaunt relatives. And now, Harry, if you will stand . . .”

Dumbledore rose, and Harry saw that he was again holding a small crystal bottle filled with swirling, pearly memory.

“I was very lucky to collect this,” he said, as he poured the gleaming mass into the Pensieve. “As you will understand when we have experienced it. Shall we?”

Harry stepped up to the stone basin and bowed obediently until his

face sank through the surface of the memory; he felt the familiar sensation of falling through nothingness and then landed upon a dirty stone floor in almost total darkness.

It took him several seconds to recognize the place, by which time Dumbledore had landed beside him. The Gaunts' house was now more indescribably filthy than anywhere Harry had ever seen. The ceiling was thick with cobwebs, the floor coated in grime; moldy and rotting food lay upon the table amidst a mass of crusted pots. The only light came from a single guttering candle placed at the feet of a man with hair and beard so overgrown Harry could see neither eyes nor mouth. He was slumped in an armchair by the fire, and Harry wondered for a moment whether he was dead. But then there came a loud knock on the door and the man jerked awake, raising a wand in his right hand and a short knife in his left.

The door creaked open. There on the threshold, holding an old-fashioned lamp, stood a boy Harry recognized at once: tall, pale, dark-haired, and handsome — the teenage Voldemort.

Voldemort's eyes moved slowly around the hovel and then found the man in the armchair. For a few seconds they looked at each other, then the man staggered upright, the many empty bottles at his feet clattering and tinkling across the floor.

“YOU!” he bellowed. “YOU!”

And he hurtled drunkenly at Riddle, wand and knife held aloft.

“*Stop.*”

Riddle spoke in Parseltongue. The man skidded into the table, sending moldy pots crashing to the floor. He stared at Riddle. There was a long silence while they contemplated each other. The man

broke it.

"You speak it?"

"Yes, I speak it," said Riddle. He moved forward into the room, allowing the door to swing shut behind him. Harry could not help but feel a resentful admiration for Voldemort's complete lack of fear. His face merely expressed disgust and, perhaps, disappointment.

"Where is Marvolo?" he asked.

"Dead," said the other. *"Died years ago, didn't he?"*

Riddle frowned.

"Who are you, then?"

"I'm Morfin, ain't I?"

"Marvolo's son?"

"'Course I am, then . . ."

Morfin pushed the hair out of his dirty face, the better to see Riddle, and Harry saw that he wore Marvolo's black-stoned ring on his right hand.

"I thought you was that Muggle," whispered Morfin. *"You look mighty like that Muggle."*

"What Muggle?" said Riddle sharply.

"That Muggle what my sister took a fancy to, that Muggle what lives in the big house over the way," said Morfin, and he spat unexpectedly upon the floor between them. *"You look right like him. Riddle. But he's older now, in 'e? He's older 'n you, now I think on it. . . ."*

Morfin looked slightly dazed and swayed a little, still clutching the edge of the table for support. *"He come back, see,"* he added

stupidly.

Voldemort was gazing at Morfin as though appraising his possibilities. Now he moved a little closer and said, "*Riddle came back?*"

"*Ar, he left her, and serve her right, marrying filth!*" said Morfin, spitting on the floor again. "*Robbed us, mind, before she ran off! Where's the locket, eh, where's Slytherin's locket?*"

Voldemort did not answer. Morfin was working himself into a rage again; he brandished his knife and shouted, "*Dishonored us, she did, that little slut! And who're you, coming here and asking questions about all that? It's over, innit. . . . It's over. . . .*"

He looked away, staggering slightly, and Voldemort moved forward. As he did so, an unnatural darkness fell, extinguishing Voldemort's lamp and Morfin's candle, extinguishing everything. . . .

Dumbledore's fingers closed tightly around Harry's arm and they were soaring back into the present again. The soft golden light in Dumbledore's office seemed to dazzle Harry's eyes after that impenetrable darkness.

"Is that all?" said Harry at once. "Why did it go dark, what happened?"

"Because Morfin could not remember anything from that point onward," said Dumbledore, gesturing Harry back into his seat. "When he awoke next morning, he was lying on the floor, quite alone. Marvolo's ring had gone.

"Meanwhile, in the village of Little Hangleton, a maid was running along the High Street, screaming that there were three bodies lying in the drawing room of the big house: Tom Riddle Senior and his

mother and father.

“The Muggle authorities were perplexed. As far as I am aware, they do not know to this day how the Riddles died, for the *Avada Kedavra* curse does not usually leave any sign of damage. . . . The exception sits before me,” Dumbledore added, with a nod to Harry’s scar. “The Ministry, on the other hand, knew at once that this was a wizard’s murder. They also knew that a convicted Muggle-hater lived across the valley from the Riddle house, a Muggle-hater who had already been imprisoned once for attacking one of the murdered people.

“So the Ministry called upon Morfin. They did not need to question him, to use Veritaserum or Legilimency. He admitted to the murder on the spot, giving details only the murderer could know. He was proud, he said, to have killed the Muggles, had been awaiting his chance all these years. He handed over his wand, which was proved at once to have been used to kill the Riddles. And he permitted himself to be led off to Azkaban without a fight. All that disturbed him was the fact that his father’s ring had disappeared. ‘He’ll kill me for losing it,’ he told his captors over and over again. ‘He’ll kill me for losing his ring.’ And that, apparently, was all he ever said again. He lived out the remainder of his life in Azkaban, lamenting the loss of Marvolo’s last heirloom, and is buried beside the prison, alongside the other poor souls who have expired within its walls.”

“So Voldemort stole Morfin’s wand and used it?” said Harry, sitting up straight.

“That’s right,” said Dumbledore. “We have no memories to show us this, but I think we can be fairly sure what happened. Voldemort

Stupefied his uncle, took his wand, and proceeded across the valley to ‘the big house over the way.’ There he murdered the Muggle man who had abandoned his witch mother, and, for good measure, his Muggle grandparents, thus obliterating the last of the unworthy Riddle line and revenging himself upon the father who never wanted him. Then he returned to the Gaunt hovel, performed the complex bit of magic that would implant a false memory in his uncle’s mind, laid Morfin’s wand beside its unconscious owner, pocketed the ancient ring he wore, and departed.”

“And Morfin never realized he hadn’t done it?”

“Never,” said Dumbledore. “He gave, as I say, a full and boastful confession.”

“But he had this real memory in him all the time!”

“Yes, but it took a great deal of skilled Legilimency to coax it out of him,” said Dumbledore, “and why should anybody delve further into Morfin’s mind when he had already confessed to the crime? However, I was able to secure a visit to Morfin in the last weeks of his life, by which time I was attempting to discover as much as I could about Voldemort’s past. I extracted this memory with difficulty. When I saw what it contained, I attempted to use it to secure Morfin’s release from Azkaban. Before the Ministry reached their decision, however, Morfin had died.”

“But how come the Ministry didn’t realize that Voldemort had done all that to Morfin?” Harry asked angrily. “He was underage at the time, wasn’t he? I thought they could detect underage magic!”

“You are quite right — they can detect magic, but not the perpetrator: You will remember that you were blamed by the

Ministry for the Hover Charm that was, in fact, cast by —”

“Dobby,” growled Harry; this injustice still rankled. “So if you’re underage and you do magic inside an adult witch or wizard’s house, the Ministry won’t know?”

“They will certainly be unable to tell who performed the magic,” said Dumbledore, smiling slightly at the look of great indignation on Harry’s face. “They rely on witch and wizard parents to enforce their offspring’s obedience while within their walls.”

“Well, that’s rubbish,” snapped Harry. “Look what happened here, look what happened to Morfin!”

“I agree,” said Dumbledore. “Whatever Morfin was, he did not deserve to die as he did, blamed for murders he had not committed. But it is getting late, and I want you to see this other memory before we part. . . .”

Dumbledore took from an inside pocket another crystal phial and Harry fell silent at once, remembering that Dumbledore had said it was the most important one he had collected. Harry noticed that the contents proved difficult to empty into the Pensieve, as though they had congealed slightly; did memories go bad?

“This will not take long,” said Dumbledore, when he had finally emptied the phial. “We shall be back before you know it. Once more into the Pensieve, then. . . .”

And Harry fell again through the silver surface, landing this time right in front of a man he recognized at once.

It was a much younger Horace Slughorn. Harry was so used to him bald that he found the sight of Slughorn with thick, shiny, straw-colored hair quite disconcerting; it looked as though he had had his

head thatched, though there was already a shiny Galleon-sized bald patch on his crown. His mustache, less massive than it was these days, was gingery-blond. He was not quite as rotund as the Slughorn Harry knew, though the golden buttons on his richly embroidered waistcoat were taking a fair amount of strain. His little feet resting upon a velvet pouffe, he was sitting well back in a comfortable winged armchair, one hand grasping a small glass of wine, the other searching through a box of crystalized pineapple.

Harry looked around as Dumbledore appeared beside him and saw that they were standing in Slughorn's office. Half a dozen boys were sitting around Slughorn, all on harder or lower seats than his, and all in their mid-teens. Harry recognized Voldemort at once. His was the most handsome face and he looked the most relaxed of all the boys. His right hand lay negligently upon the arm of his chair; with a jolt, Harry saw that he was wearing Marvolo's gold-and-black ring; he had already killed his father.

"Sir, is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?" he asked.

"Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you," said Slughorn, wagging a reproving, sugar-covered finger at Riddle, though ruining the effect slightly by winking. "I must say, I'd like to know where you get your information, boy, more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are."

Riddle smiled; the other boys laughed and cast him admiring looks.

"What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter — thank you for the pineapple, by the way, you're quite right, it is my favorite —"

As several of the boys tittered, something very odd happened. The

whole room was suddenly filled with a thick white fog, so that Harry could see nothing but the face of Dumbledore, who was standing beside him. Then Slughorn's voice rang out through the mist, unnaturally loudly, *"You'll go wrong, boy, mark my words."*

The fog cleared as suddenly as it had appeared and yet nobody made any allusion to it, nor did anybody look as though anything unusual had just happened. Bewildered, Harry looked around as a small golden clock standing upon Slughorn's desk chimed eleven o'clock.

"Good gracious, is it that time already?" said Slughorn. "You'd better get going, boys, or we'll all be in trouble. Lestrangle, I want your essay by tomorrow or it's detention. Same goes for you, Avery."

Slughorn pulled himself out of his armchair and carried his empty glass over to his desk as the boys filed out. Voldemort, however, stayed behind. Harry could tell he had dawdled deliberately, wanting to be last in the room with Slughorn.

"Look sharp, Tom," said Slughorn, turning around and finding him still present. "You don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a prefect . . ."

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away. . . ."

"Sir, I wondered what you know about . . . about Horcruxes?"

And it happened all over again: The dense fog filled the room so that Harry could not see Slughorn or Voldemort at all; only Dumbledore, smiling serenely beside him. Then Slughorn's voice boomed out again, just as it had done before.

"I don't know anything about Horcruxes and I wouldn't tell you

if I did! Now get out of here at once and don't let me catch you mentioning them again!"

"Well, that's that," said Dumbledore placidly beside Harry. "Time to go."

And Harry's feet left the floor to fall, seconds later, back onto the rug in front of Dumbledore's desk.

"That's all there is?" said Harry blankly.

Dumbledore had said that this was the most important memory of all, but he could not see what was so significant about it. Admittedly the fog, and the fact that nobody seemed to have noticed it, was odd, but other than that nothing seemed to have happened except that Voldemort had asked a question and failed to get an answer.

"As you might have noticed," said Dumbledore, reseating himself behind his desk, "that memory has been tampered with."

"Tampered with?" repeated Harry, sitting back down too.

"Certainly," said Dumbledore. "Professor Slughorn has meddled with his own recollections."

"But why would he do that?"

"Because, I think, he is ashamed of what he remembers," said Dumbledore. "He has tried to rework the memory to show himself in a better light, obliterating those parts which he does not wish me to see. It is, as you will have noticed, very crudely done, and that is all to the good, for it shows that the true memory is still there beneath the alterations."

"And so, for the first time, I am giving you homework, Harry. It will be your job to persuade Professor Slughorn to divulge the real memory, which will undoubtedly be our most crucial piece of

information of all.”

Harry stared at him.

“But surely, sir,” he said, keeping his voice as respectful as possible, “you don’t need me — you could use Legilimency . . . or Veritaserum . . .”

“Professor Slughorn is an extremely able wizard who will be expecting both,” said Dumbledore. “He is much more accomplished at Occlumency than poor Morfin Gaunt, and I would be astonished if he has not carried an antidote to Veritaserum with him ever since I coerced him into giving me this travesty of a recollection.

“No, I think it would be foolish to attempt to wrest the truth from Professor Slughorn by force, and might do much more harm than good; I do not wish him to leave Hogwarts. However, he has his weaknesses like the rest of us, and I believe that you are the one person who might be able to penetrate his defenses. It is most important that we secure the true memory, Harry. . . . How important, we will only know when we have seen the real thing. So, good luck . . . and good night.”

A little taken aback by the abrupt dismissal, Harry got to his feet quickly. “Good night, sir.”

As he closed the study door behind him, he distinctly heard Phineas Nigellus say, “I can’t see why the boy should be able to do it better than you, Dumbledore.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to, Phineas,” replied Dumbledore, and Fawkes gave another low, musical cry.

'n Slakkepasgeheue

Laatmiddag, 'n paar dae ná Nuwejaar, staan Harry, Ron en Ginny agter mekaar voor die kombuisvuur en wag om terug Hogwarts toe te gaan. Die Ministerie het gereël vir 'n eenmalige verbinding met die Floo-netwerk sodat die studente vinnig en veilig by die skool kan kom. Net mevrou Weasley is daar om tot siens te sê, want meneer Weasley, Fred, George, Bill en Fleur is almal by die werk. Toe die oomblik kom om te groet, bars mevrou Weasley in trane uit. Toegee, dit vat deesdae baie min om haar aan die huil te kry; sy ween elke nou en dan vandat Percy op Kersdag by die huis uitgestorm het met sy bril vol fyngemaalde witwortels (iets waarvoor Fred, George en Ginny almal krediet probeer neem).

“Moenie huil nie,” sê Ginny en streel haar ma se rug terwyl mevrou Weasley op haar skouer snik. “Dis als oukei ...”

“Ja, moenie oor ons worrie nie,” sê Ron en laat sy ma toe om 'n baie nat soen op sy wang te plak, “of oor Percy nie. Hy's so 'n aapstert; hy's nie regtig 'n verlies nie.”

Mevrou Weasley snik harder as ooit toe sy Harry in haar arms toevou.

“Belowe my jy sal mooi na jouself kyk ... Bly uit die moeilikheid ...”

“Ek doen dit altyd, mevrou Weasley,” sê Harry. “Ek hou van 'n stil lewe. Julle ken my mos.”

Sy lag deur haar trane en staan terug.

“Soet wees, julle almal ...”

Harry klim in die smaraggroen vuur en skree: “Hogwarts!” Hy sien die Weasleys se kombuis en mevrou Weasley se betraande gesig nog vir 'n vlietende oomblik voor die vlamme hom insluk. Hy tol baie vinnig en sien skramsweg ander towenaarvertrekke wat weer verdwyn voor hy ordentlik kan kyk; dan tol hy al stadiger tot hy hom uiteindelik in die kaggel in professor McGonagall se kantoor bevind. Sy kyk skaars van haar werk af op toe hy uit die vuurherd klim.

"Naand, Potter. Probeer om nie te veel as op die mat te mors nie."

"Reg, professor."

Harry skuif sy bril reg en vee sy hare plat terwyl Ron al tollende verskyn. Hulle wag vir Ginny en dan stap die drie by professor McGonagall se kantoor uit, reguit Gryffindortoring toe. Harry loer in die verbygaan by die gangvensters uit; die son sak reeds oor die skoolgrond wat dieper as Die Konynes se tuin toegesneeu is. In die verte sien hy vir Hagrid wat Bokbok voor sy hut voer.

"Tierlantynjies," sê Ron selfversekerd toe hulle by die Vet Vrou kom. Sy lyk heelwat bleker as gewoonlik en ril vir sy harde stem.

"Nee," sê sy.

"Wat bedoel jy, 'nee'?"

"Daar is 'n nuwe wagwoord," sê sy. "En moet asseblief nie skree nie."

"Maar ons was weg. Hoe is ons veronderstel om – ?"

"Harry! Ginny!"

Hermione kom haastig nader. Sy is pienk in die gesig en dra 'n mantel, hoed en handskoene.

"Ek het al 'n paar uur gelede teruggekom. Ek was nou net onder by Hagrid en Bok – ek bedoel Flinkvlerk," sê sy uitasem. "Het julle 'n lekker Kersfees gehad?"

"Ja," sê Ron dadelik, "vol dinge. Rufus Scrim –"

"Ek het iets vir jou, Harry," sê Hermione sonder om na Ron te kyk of enigsins te laat blyk dat sy hom gehoor het. "O, wag bietjie – die wagwoord. *Onthouding*."

"Presies," sê die Vet Vrou in 'n flou stem en swaai vorentoe sodat hulle by die portretopening kan kom.

"Wat makeer haar?" vra Harry.

"Sy't haar blykbaar oor die Kerstyd vergryp," sê Hermione en rol haar oë terwyl sy eerste by die stampvol geselskamer instap. "Sy en haar vriendin Violet het glo al die wyn in daardie skildery van die dronk monnike daar in die Towerspreukgang opgedrink. In elk geval ..."

Sy soek vir 'n oomblik in haar sakke rond en haal dan 'n perka-mentrol met Dumbledore se handskrif op uit.

"Wonderlik," sê Harry. Hy rol dit dadelik oop en sien sy volgende les by Dumbledore is vir die volgende aand geskeduleer. "Ek het baie om hom te vertel – en vir julle. Kom ons sit –"

Maar op daardie oomblik is daar 'n harde kreet van "Won-Won!" en Lavender Brown storm van nêrens op hulle af en gooi haarself in Ron se arms. 'n Hele paar omstanders grinnik; Hermione lag klokhelder en sê: "Daar's 'n tafel ... kom jy, Ginny?"

“Nee dankie, ek het vir Dean gesê ek ontmoet hom hier,” sê Ginny, en Harry kan nie help om op te merk dat sy nie baie entoesiasies klink nie. Hulle laat Ron en Lavender agter in ’n soort vertikale stoeigeveg en Harry lei Hermione na die oop tafel.

“So, hoe was jou Kersfees?”

“O, oukei,” sê sy en haal haar skouers op. “Niks spesiaals nie. Hoe was dit daar by Won-Won-hulle?”

“Ek sal jou nou vertel,” sê Harry. “Luister, Hermione, kan jy nie – ?”

“Nee, ek kan nie,” sê sy beslis. “So moenie eens vra nie.”

“Ek het gedink jy sal miskien, jy weet, ná Kersfees –”

“Dis die Vet Vrou wat ’n vaatjie vyfhonderd jaar oue wyn gedrink het, Harry, nie ek nie. So wat is die belangrike nuus wat jy my wil vertel?”

Sy lyk op daardie oomblik te kwaai om mee te argumenteer; Harry laat vaar die Ron-onderwerp en vertel haar wat hy gehoor het toe hy Malfoy en Snape afgeluister het.

Toe hy klaar is, sit Hermione ’n oomblik ingedagte en sê dan: “Dink jy nie – ?”

“– hy het net gemaak of hy wil help om Malfoy sover te kry om vir hom te vertel wat hy beplan nie?”

“Wel, ja,” sê Hermione.

“Ron se pa en Lupin dink so,” sê Harry wrewelrig. “Maar dit bewys definitief Malfoy beplan iets; dit kan jy nie ontken nie.”

“Nee, ek kan nie,” sê sy stadig.

“En hy voer opdragte vir Voldemort uit; nes ek gesê het!”

“Hmm ... Het een van hulle ooit Voldemort se naam genoem?”

Harry frons en probeer onthou.

“Ek is nie seker nie ... Snape het definitief ‘jou meester’ gesê, en wie anders kan dit wees?”

“Ek weet nie,” sê Hermione en byt haar lip. “Miskien sy pa?”

Sy staar oor die vertrek uit, so diep ingedagte dat sy nie eens opmerk hoe Lavender Ron kielie nie. “Hoe gaan dit met Lupin?”

“Nie te goed nie,” sê Harry. Hy vertel haar van Lupin se sending tussen die weerwolwe en die probleme waarteen hy te staan kom. “Het jy al van hierdie Fenrir Greyback gehoor?”

“Ja, ek het!” sê Hermione en klink geskok. “En jy ook, Harry!”

“Wanneer? In Geskiedenis van Towerkuns? Jy weet goed ek het nooit geluister ...”

“Nee, nee, nie in Geskiedenis van Towerkuns nie – Malfoy het Borgin met hom gedreig!” sê Hermione. “Daar in Nagliedsteeg, onthou jy nie? Hy het vir Borgin gesê Greyback is ’n ou familievriend en hy sal kom seker maak Borgin vorder!”

Harry gaap haar aan. "Ek het vergeet! Maar dit bewys mos Malfoy is 'n Doodseter! Hoe anders kan hy in kontak met Greyback wees en vir hom sê wat om te doen?"

"Dis baie verdag," fluister Hermione. "Tensy ..."

"Ag, komaan!" sê Harry vererg. "Jy kan nie om hierdie een kom nie!"

"Wel ... daar is 'n moontlikheid dat dit net 'n leë dreigement was."

"Jy's ongelooflik, weet jy," sê Harry en skud sy kop. "Ons sal sien wie is reg ... Jy gaan jou woorde nog sluk, Hermione, nes die Ministerie. O ja, ek en Rufus Scrimgeour het stry gekry ..."

Die res van die aand gesels hulle heerlik en kraak die Ministerie van Towerkuns af, want Hermione glo net soos Ron die Ministerie is vermetel om Harry se hulp te vra ná alles waardeur hulle hom verlede jaar laat gaan het.

Die volgende oggend begin die nuwe kwartaal met 'n aangename verrassing vir die sesdejaars: Daar is oornag 'n groot aankondiging teen die geselskamer se kennisgewingbord vasgesteek.

LEER APPAREER

As jy sewentien jaar oud is, of op of voor 31 Augustus sewentien word, kwalifiseer jy vir 'n twaalf weke lange Appareringskursus, aangebied deur 'n Appareringsinstrukteur van die Ministerie van Towerkuns.

*Vul asseblief jou naam hieronder in as jy die kursus wil volg.
Koste: 12 Galjoene.*

Harry en Ron sluit aan by die klomp wat om die kennisgewing saamdrom en beurte maak om hul name in te vul. Ron haal net mooi sy veerpen uit om sy naam onder Hermione s'n in te skryf toe Lavender hom van agter bekruipt, sy oë met haar hande toedruk en koer: "Raai wie, Won-Won?" Harry draai om en sien Hermione padgee; hy volg haar, want hy is nie lus vir Ron en Lavender nie, maar tot sy verbasing haal Ron hulle net 'n entjie van die portret-opening met bloedrooi ore en 'n onvergenoegde uitdrukking in. Hermione versnel haar pas sonder 'n woord en sluit by Neville aan.

"So – ons gaan leer Appareer," sê Ron in 'n stemtoon wat dit vir Harry duidelik maak dat hy nie moet praat oor wat nou net gebeur het nie. "Behoort sports te wees, nè?"

"Weet'ie," sê Harry. "Miskien is dit beter as jy dit self doen. Dit was nie vir my lekker toe Dumbledore my saam met hom geneem het nie."

"Ek het vergeet jy't dit al gedoen ... Ek beter my toets die eerste keer deurkom," sê Ron bekommerd. "Fred en George het."

“Maar Charlie het gedop, nie waar nie?”

“Ja, maar Charlie is groter as ek,” sê Ron en maak sy arms bak langs sy lyf asof hy ’n gorilla is, “Fred en George het dus nie te veel daaroor aangegaan nie ... in elk geval nie voor hom nie ...”

“Wanneer kan ons die toets doen?”

“Sodra ons sewentien is. En vir my is dit al in Maart!”

“Ja, maar jy sal nie hier mag Appareer nie, nie in die kasteel nie ...”

“Wat maak dit saak? Almal sal weet ek *kan* Appareer as ek wil.”

Ron is nie die enigste een wat opgewonde is oor die vooruitsig om te leer Appareer nie. Almal praat daardie dag oor die naderende lesse; daar word groot waarde geheg aan die vermoë om na willekeur te verdwyn en weer te verskyn.

“Dit gaan *cool* wees om net te kan –” Seamus klap sy vingers om te wys hoe hy gaan verdwyn. “My neef Fergus doen dit heeltyd om my te terg; ek gaan hom terugkry ... Hy gaan nooit weer een oomblik van vrede hê nie ...”

Verlore in visioene van hierdie heerlike vooruitsig swiep hy sy towerstaf ’n bietjie té entoesiasies en pleks dat daar ’n fontein suiver water uitborrel (die projek vir vandag se Towerspreukklas), spuit daar ’n straal soos vanuit ’n tuinslang wat van die plafon af terugspat en professor Flitwick vol in die gesig tref.

“Harry het al geAppareer,” sê Ron vir ’n bra skaam Seamus nadat professor Flitwick homself met ’n swaai van sy towerstaf afgedroog en vir Seamus uitskryfwerk gegee het (“*Ek is ’n towenaar, nie ’n bobbejaan wat ’n stok rondswaai nie.*”). “Dum– e – iemand het hom saamgevat. Sy-aan-sy-Apparering, weet jy.”

“Wou!” fluister Seamus en hy, Dean en Neville bring hul koppe ’n bietjie nader om te hoor hoe dit is om te Appareer. Die res van die dag word Harry oorval met versoeke van die ander sesdejaars om te beskryf hoe dit voel wanneer jy Appareer. Hulle lyk almal opgewonde eerder as afgeskrik as hy vertel hoe ongemaklik dit is, en teen tien voor agt die aand beantwoord hy nog steeds ellelange vrae; hy moet noodgedwonge jok en sê hy moet ’n boek terugneem biblioteek toe sodat hy betyds vir sy les by Dumbledore kan ontnap.

Die lampe in Dumbledore se kantoor is aangesteek, die portrette van vorige skoolhoofde snork rustig in hul rame en die Peinssif staan weer eens gereed op die lessenaar. Dumbledore se hande lê weerskante daarvan; sy regterhand lyk nog net so swart en verbrand soos altyd. Dit lyk nie of dit enigsins gesond word nie en Harry wonder vir seker die honderdste keer wat so ’n eienaardige besering kon veroorsaak het, maar hy vra nie; Dumbledore het gesê hy sal hom op die ou end vertel en daar is in elk geval ’n ander onderwerp

waaroor hy wil gesels. Maar voor Harry enigiets van Snape en Malfoy kan sê, praat Dumbledore.

“Ek hoor jy het die Minister van Towerkuns oor die Kerstyd ontmoet?”

“Ja,” sê Harry. “En hy is nie baie gelukkig met my nie.”

“Nee,” sug Dumbledore. “Hy is ook nie baie gelukkig met my nie. Ons moet probeer om nie deur ons misnoeë oorval te word nie Harry, en aan te hou veg.”

Harry grinnik.

“Hy wil hê ek moet vir die towenaarswêreld sê die Ministerie doen wonderlike werk.”

Dumbledore glimlag.

“Dit was oorspronklik Fudge se idee, weet jy. Tydens sy laaste dae in daardie amp, toe hy desperaat aan sy pos probeer vasklou het, wou hy ’n ontmoeting met jou reël in die hoop dat jy hom sal ondersteun –”

“Ná alles wat Fudge laas jaar gedoen het?” sê Harry kwaad. “Ná *Umbridge*?”

“Ek het vir Cornelius gesê dis buite die kwessie, maar die idee het nie saam met hom gesneuwel nie. Ek en Scrimgeour het mekaar enkele ure ná sy aanstelling ontmoet en hy het daarop aangedring dat ek moet reël dat jy en hy –”

“So dis waarom julle vasgesit het!” sê Harry. “Ek het in die *Daaglikse Profeet* daarvan geles.”

“Die *Profeet* is verplig om by geleentheid die waarheid te berig,” sê Dumbledore, “al is dit bloot per ongeluk. Ja, dit is waarom ons vasgesit het. Wel, dit lyk my Rufus het toe uiteindelik ’n manier gekry om jou vas te pen.”

“Hy het my daarvan beskuldig dat ek ‘deur en deur Dumbledore se man’ is.”

“Hoe ongemanierd van hom.”

“Ek het vir hom gesê ek is.”

Dumbledore maak sy mond oop om te praat en maak dit dan weer toe. Agter Harry gee Fawkes die feniks ’n lae, sagte, musikale kreet. Tot Harry se groot verleentheid besef hy skielik Dumbledore se helderblou oë lyk taamlik waterig en hy kyk haastig af na sy eie knieë. Maar toe Dumbledore praat, is sy stem heeltemal egalig.

“Ek voel diep geraak, Harry.”

“Scrimgeour wou weet waarheen u gaan wanneer u nie by Hogwarts is nie,” sê Harry terwyl hy nog steeds stip na sy knieë kyk.

“Ja, hy is baie nuuskierig daaroor,” sê Dumbledore wat nou vrolik klink, en Harry neem aan dit is veilig om weer op te kyk. “Hy

het selfs probeer om my te laat agtervolg. Dis eintlik amusant. Hy het Dawlish agter my aan gestuur. Dit was nie baie beleefd nie. Ek is reeds een keer vantevore gedwing om Dawlish te paljas en ek moes dit tot my groot spyt weer doen.”

“So hulle weet nog steeds nie waarheen u gaan nie?” vra Harry en hoop om meer inligting oor hierdie fassinerende onderwerp te kry, maar Dumbledore glimlag net vir hom bo-oor sy halfmaanbril.

“Nee, hulle weet nie, en die tyd is ook nog nie heeltemal ryp vir jou om te weet nie. Nou ja, ek stel voor ons gaan voort, tensy daar enigiets anders is?”

“Daar is, om die waarheid te sê, professor,” sê Harry. “Dis oor Malfoy en Snape.”

“Professor Snape, Harry.”

“Ja, professor. Ek het hulle by professor Slughorn se partytjie afgeluister ... wel, ek het hulle eintlik gevolg ...”

Dumbledore luister met 'n strak gesig na Harry se storie. Toe Harry klaar is, bly hy eers vir 'n paar oomblikke stil en sê dan: “Dankie dat jy my hiervan vertel het, Harry, maar ek stel voor jy vergeet daarvan. Ek dink nie dit is baie belangrik nie.”

“Nie baie belangrik nie?” herhaal Harry ongelowig. “Professor, het u verstaan –”

“Ek is met buitengewone breinkrag geseën, Harry; ek verstaan alles wat jy my vertel het,” sê Dumbledore effens skerp. “Ek dink jy kan selfs die moontlikheid oorweeg dat ek meer as jy verstaan het. Weer eens, ek is bly jy het my in jou vertrouwe geneem, maar ek verseker jou jy het my niks vertel wat my tot onrus stem nie.”

Harry sit daar en kook van woede. Hy gluur Dumbledore aan. Wat gaan aan? Beteken dit Dumbledore het wel vir Snape opdrag gegee om uit te vind wat Malfoy in die mou voer, in welke geval hy reeds alles wat Harry nou net vir hom vertel het by Snape gehoor het? Of maak dit wat hy gehoor het hom só bekommerd dat hy voorgee dit skeel hom min?

“So, professor,” sê Harry in 'n stemtoon wat hy hoop beleefd en kalm is, “u vertrou definitief nog steeds vir – ?”

“Ek was reeds vroeër geduldig genoeg om daardie vraag te beantwoord,” sê Dumbledore, maar hy klink nie meer baie geduldig nie. “My antwoord bly dieselfde.”

“Ek sou so dink,” sê 'n snedige stem; Phineas Nigellus het klaarblyklik net gemaak of hy slaap. Dumbledore ignoreer hom.

“En nou, Harry, moet ek daarop aandring dat ons voortgaan. Daar is belangriker dinge wat ek vanaand met jou wil bespreek.”

Harry voel opstandig. Sê nou hy weier om die onderwerp te

verander, sê nou hy dring daarop aan om verder oor Malfoy te praat? Dit is asof Dumbledore sy gedagtes geles het, want hy skud sy kop.

“Ag, Harry, dit gebeur so dikwels, selfs tussen die beste vriende! Elkeen van ons glo wat hy te sê het, is baie belangriker as enigiets wat die ander een kan bydra!”

“Ek dink nie wat u te sê het, is onbelangrik nie, professor,” sê Harry stroef.

“Wel, jy is heeltemal reg, want dit is nie,” sê Dumbledore vinnig. “Ek wil vanaand vir jou nog twee herinneringe wys. Ek het albei met groot moeite bekom en die tweede een is na my mening die belangrikste een nóg.”

Harry sê niks hierop nie; hy is nog steeds vies oor Dumbledore se reaksie op dit waarmee hy hom in sy vertroude geneem het, maar kan nie sien wat dit sal help om verder daaroor te argumenteer nie.

“So,” sê Dumbledore met ’n welluidende stem, “ons is vanaand hier om voort te gaan met die verhaal van Tom Riddle, wat ons ná die vorige les op die vooraand van sy jare hier in Hogwarts agtergelaat het. Jy sal onthou hoe opgewonde hy was om te hoor hy is ’n towenaar, dat hy my nie saam met hom Diagonaalstraat toe wou laat gaan nie en dat ek hom op my beurt gewaarsku het teen verdere diefstal terwyl hy hier skoolgaan.

“Wel, die begin van die skooljaar het aangebreek en Tom Riddle het hier opgedaag: ’n stil seun wat in sy tweedehandse klere saam met die ander eerstejaars in die ry gestaan en wag het om gesorteer te word. Die oomblik dat die Sorteelhoed aan sy kop geraak het, is hy by Huis Slytherin ingedeel,” gaan Dumbledore voort en wys met sy swartgebrande hand na die rak bo sy kop waar die antieke Sorteelhoed roerloos staan. “Ek weet nie hoe gou Riddle uitgevind het daardie huis se beroemde stigter kon met slange praat nie – miskien daardie selfde aand al. Daardie kennis sou hom noodwendig opgewonde en nog meer verwaand maak het.

“Maar as hy sy mede-Slytherins in hul geselskamer met sy vermoë om Parseltaal te praat, probeer bang maak of beïndruk het, het die personeel nooit enigiets agtergekom nie. Hy het hoegenaamd geen uiterlike tekens van arrogansie of aggressie getoon nie. Synde ’n buitengewoon talentvolle en baie aantreklike weeskind, het hy natuurlik van die oomblik dat hy hier aangekom het baie aandag en simpatie van die personeel gekry. Hy was skynbaar beleefd, stil en honger vir kennis. Amper almal was hoogs beïndruk met hom.”

“Het professor nie vir hulle vertel hoe hy was toe u hom by die weeshuis gaan sien het nie?” vra Harry.

“Nee, ek het nie. Hoewel hy geen teken van berou getoon het nie, was dit moontlik dat hy spyt was oor sy optrede van vroeër en dat hy vasberade was om ’n nuwe blaadjie om te slaan. Ek het besluit om hom daardie kans te gun.”

Dumbledore bly stil en kyk vraend na Harry wat sy mond oopgemaak het om iets te sê. Hier is dit al weer: Dumbledore se neiging om mense te vertrou, al is daar verdoemende bewyse dat hulle dit nie verdien nie! Maar dan onthou Harry iets ...

“Maar professor het hom nie regtig vertrou nie, het u? Hy’t vir my gesê ... die Riddle wat uit daai dagboek gekom het, het gesê: ‘Dumbledore het nooit so baie van my gehou soos die ander onderwysers nie’.”

“Kom ons sê maar net ek het dit nie as vanselfsprekend aanvaar dat hy betroubaar is nie,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek het, soos ek reeds aangedui het, besluit om hom fyn dop te hou, en ek hét ook. Ek kan nie sê ek het aanvanklik veel uit my waarneming wys geword nie. Hy was baie lugtig vir my; ek dink hy het gevoel hy het my te veel van homself vertel tydens daardie oomblikke van opwindning toe hy sy ware identiteit ontdek het. Hy het seker gemaak hy onthul nooit weer soveel nie, maar hy kon nie dit wat hy in sy opwindning uitgelap het, terugtrek nie, en dan was daar nog die dinge waarvan mevrou Cole my vertel het. Maar hy was verstandig genoeg om my nie met sy sjarme te probeer betower soos wat hy met baie van my kollegas gedoen het nie.

“Soos wat sy skoolloopbaan gevorder het, het hy ’n groep lojale vriende om hom vergader; ek noem hulle só weens gebrek aan ’n beter woord, hoewel ek jou reeds daarop gewys het dat Riddle ongetwyfeld geen toegeneentheid teenoor enigeen van hulle gevoel het nie. Hierdie groep het ’n soort donker aansien in die kasteel geniet. Hulle was ’n vreemde versameling studente; ’n mengsel van swakkes wat beskerming soek, ambisieuses wat gedeelde glorie najaag, en boefagtiges wat aangetrokke gevoel het tot ’n leier wat vir hulle meer verfynde vorms van wreedheid kon leer. Met ander woorde, hulle was die voorlopers van die Doodseters en party van hulle het inderdaad die eerste Doodseters geword nadat hulle by Hogwarts weg is.

“Riddle het hulle met ’n ysterhand beheer en hulle is nooit aan die kaak gestel vir openlike misstappe nie, hoewel hul sewe jaar by Hogwarts gekenmerk is deur ’n aantal lelike insidente waarmee hulle nooit ten volle verbind kon word nie. Die ernstigste voorval was natuurlik die betreding van die Kamer van Geheimenisse, wat op ’n meisie se dood uitgeloop het. Soos jy weet, is Hagrid ten onregte van daardie misdaad beskuldig.

“Ek kon nie baie herinneringe aan Riddle se skooljare by Hogwarts opspoor nie,” sê Dumbledore en sit sy verskrompelde hand op die Peinssif. “Min mense wat hom geken het, is bereid om oor hom te praat; hulle is te angsbevange. Dit wat ek weet, het ek uitgevind nadat hy by Hogwarts weg is, ná noukeurige navorsing, ná ek die paar wat ek wél kon oorreed om te praat, opgespoor het, ná ek ou rekords nagegaan en getuies uit Moggel- en towenaarsgeledere ondervra het.

“Diegene wat ek kon ompraat om iets te sê, het my vertel dat Riddle ’n obsessie oor sy herkoms gehad het. Dit is natuurlik verstaanbaar; hy het in ’n weeshuis grootgeword en wou vanselfsprekend uitvind hoe hy daar beland het. Hy het blykbaar tevergeefs op die skilde in die trofeekamer, in die ou skoolrekords se lysste van prefekte en selfs in die boeke oor die geskiedenis van toorkuns na Tom Riddle Senior se naam gesoek. Uiteindelik moes hy noodgedwonge aanvaar dat sy pa nooit in Hogwarts was nie. Ek vermoed dit was toe dat hy die naam vir goed afgesweer het. Hy het die Heer Voldemort se identiteit aangeneem en begin ondersoek instel na sy ma wat hy eens so verag het, se familie. Soos jy sekerlik kan onthou, het hy gemeen sy kon nie ’n heks gewees het as sy voor die skandelijke menslike swakheid van die dood geswig het nie.

“Al wat hy kon navolg, was die enkele naam ‘Marvolo’ wat volgens die mense in beheer van die weeshuis sy ma se pa se naam was. Uiteindelik, nadat hy ou boeke oor towenaarfamilies sorgvuldig gefynkam het, het hy die bestaan van Slytherin se geslagslyn ontdek. In die somer van sy sestiende jaar is hy weg by die weeshuis waarheen hy jaarliks teruggekeer het om na sy Gaunt-familie te gaan soek. En nou, Harry, moet jy asseblief opstaan ...”

Dumbledore kom op die been en Harry sien hy hou weer ’n klein kristalbotteltjie vas waarin ’n pêrelagtige herinnering om en om maal.

“Ek was baie gelukkig om hierdie een te kry,” sê hy terwyl hy die glinsterende stof in die Peinssif uitgooi. “Jy sal verstaan wanneer ons dit beleef het. Sal ons?”

Harry kom tot by die klipkom en buig gedienstig vooroor totdat sy gesig deur die oppervlak van die herinnering sink; hy voel die bekende sensasie van deur die niet val en kom dan op ’n vuil klipvloer in amper totale duisternis te staan.

Dit neem hom ’n hele paar sekondes om die plek te herken en teen hierdie tyd staan Dumbledore ook al langs hom. Die Gaunts se huis is nou meer onbeskryflik vieslik as enigiets wat Harry nog ooit gesien het. Die plafon is dik van spinnerakke, die vloer is met gemors

besmeer en daar lê muwwe en verrotte kos op die tafel tussen 'n spul verroeste potte. Die enigste lig kom van 'n enkele druppende kers wat tussen 'n man se voete staan. Die man se hare en baard is só lank dat Harry nie sy oë of sy mond kan sien nie. Hy sit inmekaar gesak in 'n leunstoel by die vuur en Harry wonder vir 'n oomblik of hy dood is. Maar dan is daar 'n harde klop aan die deur en die man ruk wakker en lig sy towerstaf in sy regter- en 'n kort mes in sy linkerhand.

Die deur gaan krakend oop. En daar op die drumpel, met 'n outydse lamp in die hand, staan 'n seun wat Harry onmiddellik herken: lank, bleek, met donker hare en aantreklik – Voldemort as tiener.

Voldemort se oë beweeg stadig oor die hool heen en ontdek dan die man in die leunstoel. Hulle kyk 'n paar sekondes lank vir mekaar, dan steier die man regop en die baie leë bottels by sy voete kletter en klingel oor die vloer.

“JY!” brul hy. “JY!”

Hy waggel dronk na Riddle met sy towerstaf en mes omhoog.

“Stop.”

Riddle praat Parseltaal. Die man loop in die tafel vas en muw-
werige potte val op die vloer. Hy gaap Riddle aan. Daar is 'n lang stilte terwyl hulle mekaar aankyk. Die man verbreek dit.

“Jy praat dit?”

“Ja, ek praat dit,” sê Riddle. Hy beweeg by die vertrek in en laat die deur agter hom toeswaai. Harry kan nie help om Voldemort se totale gebrek aan vrees te bewonder nie. Sy gesig registreer net walging en, miskien, teleurstelling.

“Waar is Marvolo?” vra hy.

“Dood,” sê die ander een. “Jare gelede dood, is hy nie?”

Riddle frons.

“Nou wie is jy dan?”

“Ek is Morfin, is ek nie?”

“Marvolo se seun?”

“’Tuurlik, ja ...”

Morfin druk die hare uit sy vuil gesig om Riddle beter te kan sien en Harry merk hy dra Marvolo se ring met die swart steen aan sy regterhand.

“Ek dog jy’s daai Moggel,” fluister Morfin. “Jy lyk nogal soos daai Moggel.”

“Watter Moggel?” vra Riddle skerp.

“Daai Moggel op wie my suster so beenaf was, daai Moggel wat in die groot huis daar anderkant bly,” sê Morfin en hy spoeg onverwags op die vloer tussen hulle. “Jy lyk presies nes hy. Riddle. Maar hy’s nou al ouer, is hy nie? Hy’s ouer as jy, noudat ek daaraan dink ...”

Morfin lyk half deur die wind en is onvas op sy voete; hy moet aan die tafel vashou om nie om te val nie.

“Hy’t teruggekom, sien,” voeg hy suf by.

Voldemort kyk Morfin stip aan asof hy sy opsies opweeg. Dan beweeg hy ’n bietjie nader en sê: “*Riddle het teruggekom?*”

“Ja, hy’t haar gelos, en dis haar verdiende loon; sy wou mos met gemors trou!” sê Morfin en spoeg weer op die vloer. “Maar sy’t ons besteel voor sy weggeloop het! Waar’s die hangertjie, hè, waar’s Slytherin se hangertjie?”

Voldemort antwoord nie. Morfin werk weer op na ’n woedeaanval; hy swaai sy mes rond en skree: “Sy’t skande oor ons gebring, skande, die klein slet! En wie’s jy om net hier in te bars en my daaroor uit te vra? Dis verby, is dit nie? ... Dis verby ...”

Hy kyk weg, steier effens en dan beweeg Voldemort vorentoe. Op daardie oomblik daal daar ’n onnatuurlike donkerte neer wat Voldemort se lamp en Morfin se kers uitdoof, wat alles uitdoof ...

Dumbledore se vingers klem styf om Harry se arm en hulle vlieg weer terug na die hede. Die sagte goue lig in Dumbledore se kantoor verblind Harry amper ná daardie ondeurdringbare donkerte.

“Is dit al?” vra Harry dadelik. “Hoekom het dit so donker geword? Wat het gebeur?”

“Dit is omdat Morfin niks van daardie oomblik af kon onthou nie,” sê Dumbledore en beduie Harry moet weer gaan sit. “Toe hy die volgende oggend wakker word, het hy op die vloer gelê, stoksielalleen. En Marvolo se ring was weg.

“Intussen, in die dorpie Little Hangleton, het ’n huishulp met die hoofstraat af gehardloop en gegil dat daar drie lyke in die groot huis se voorkamer lê: Tom Riddle Senior, en sy ma en pa s’n.

“Die Moggelowerheid was dronkgeslaan. Sover my kennis strek, weet hulle tot vandag toe nog nie hoe die Riddles dood is nie, want die Avada Kedavra-vloek los nie letsels nie ... Die enigste uitsondering sit hier voor my,” voeg Dumbledore by en beduie na Harry se litteken. “Die Ministerie aan die ander kant, het onmiddellik geweet dit was ’n towenaarmoord. Hulle het ook geweet daar bly ’n veroordeelde Moggelhater oorkant die vallei van die Riddles se huis af, ’n Moggelhater wat reeds een keer tronkstraf opgelê is omdat hy een van die vermoorde mense aangeval het.

“Die Ministerie is dus na Morfin toe. Dit was nie nodig om hom te ondervra, of om die Veritaserum of Legilimensie te gebruik nie. Hy het sonder omhaal skuld aan die moord erken en besonderhede verskaf waaroor net die moordenaar sou kon beskik. Hy het gesê hy’s trots daarop dat hy die Moggels vermoor het en dat hy sy kans

Jare lank afgewag het. Hy het selfs sy towerstaf oorhandig en hulle het dadelik bewys dit is gebruik om die Riddles mee te vermoor. En hy het sonder teëstribbeling toegelaat dat hulle hom Azkaban toe neem. Al wat hom gepla het, was die feit dat sy pa se ring verdwyn het. "Hy maak my dood as hy uitvind ek het dit verloor," het hy oor en oor vir sy gevangeners herhaal. "Hy maak my dood as hy uitvind ek het sy ring verloor." En dit was blykbaar al wat hy daarna ooit gesê het. Hy het die res van sy lewe in Azkaban deurgebring, kermend oor die verlies van Marvolo se laaste erfstuk, en is in die tronk begrawe saam met die ander arme siele wat tussen daardie vier mure oorlede is."

"So Voldemort het Morfin se towerstaf gesteel en dit gebruik?" sê Harry en sit regop.

"Dis reg," sê Dumbledore. "Ons beskik oor geen herinneringe om dit te bewys nie, maar ek dink ons kan redelik seker wees dit was die geval. Voldemort het sy oom Bedwelm, sy towerstaf geneem en die vallei oorgesteek na 'die groot huis daar anderkant'. Daar het hy die Moggelman wat sy heksema versaak het, vermoor en sommer ook sy Moggelgrootouers en sodoende met een slag die laaste van die onwaardige Riddles se bloedlyn uitgewis en hom gewreek op die pa wat hom nooit wou hê nie. Toe is hy terug na die Gaunts se hool om 'n ingewikkelde toorkunsie uit te voer wat 'n foutiewe herinnering in sy oom sy geheue sou agterlaat; daarna het hy Morfin se towerstaf langs sy bewustelose eienaar gelos, die antieke ring wat hy dra, gevat en padgegee."

"En Morfin het nooit besef hy het dit nie gedoen nie?"

"Nooit," sê Dumbledore. "Hy het, soos ek gesê het, trots 'n skuldbekentenis afgelê."

"Maar hierdie regte herinnering was nog altyd iewers in sy geheue!"

"Ja, hoewel dit 'n groot dosis vaardige Legilimensie gekos het om dit uit hom te kry," sê Dumbledore, "en hoekom sou enigiemand verder in Morfin se brein rondkrap as hy reeds skuld aan die misdaad erken het? Nogtans, ek het daarin geslaag om Morfin tydens die laaste weke van sy lewe te besoek, want ek was toe besig om soveel moontlik oor Voldemort se verlede te probeer uitvind. Ek het hierdie herinnering met groot moeite bekom. Toe ek sien wat dit bevat, het ek dit probeer gebruik om Morfin se ontslag uit Azkaban te bewerkstellig, maar voor die Ministerie 'n besluit kon neem, is hy dood."

"Maar hoekom het die Ministerie nie uitgevind dat Voldemort dit alles aan Morfin gedoen het nie?" vra Harry ontsteld. "Hy was

daardie tyd mos nog minderjarig. Ek dog hulle vind altyd van minderjarige toorkuns uit.”

“Jy’s heeltemal reg – hulle vind uit van die toorkuns, maar nie wie die skuldige is nie. Onthou jy, toe die Ministerie jou geblameer het dat jy die Sweefhangvloek uitgespreek het, was dit in werklikheid –”

“Dobby,” grom Harry, wat nog steeds swaar aan daardie onregverdige behandeling sluk. “As jy dus minderjarig is en jy gebruik toorkuns in ’n volwasse heks of towenaar se huis sal die Ministerie nie daarvan weet nie?”

“Hulle sal beslis nie kan uitvind wie die toorkunsie uitgevoer het nie,” sê Dumbledore en glimlag effens vir die groot verontwaardiging op Harry se gesig. “Hulle maak op heks- en towenaarouers staat om seker te maak hul spruite gedra hulle behoorlik terwyl hulle tuis is.”

“Wel, dis nonsens!” bars Harry los. “Kyk wat het hier gebeur; kyk wat het Morfin oorgekom!”

“Ek stem saam,” sê Dumbledore. “Wat Morfin ook al was, het hy nie verdien om op só ’n manier aan sy einde te kom en geblameer te word vir moorde wat hy nie gepleeg het nie. Maar dit word laat, en ek wil hê jy moet hierdie ander herinnering ook sien voor ons groet ...”

Dumbledore haal nog ’n kristalflessie uit sy binnesak en Harry word dadelik stil, want hy onthou Dumbledore het gesê dit is die belangrikste een nóg wat hy in die hande kon kry. Harry sien Dumbledore sukkel om die inhoud in die Peinssif uit te gooi, asof dit al effens dikkerig geraak het; kan herinneringe dan sleg raak soos kos?

“Dit gaan nie lank neem nie,” sê Dumbledore toe die flessie uiteindelik leeg is. “Ons sal gou weer terug wees. Reg, kom ons betree die Peinssif nog ’n keer ...”

En Harry val weer deur die silwer oppervlak en land hierdie keer reg voor ’n man wat hy dadelik herken.

Dit is ’n baie jonger Horace Slughorn. Harry is so gewoond daaraan dat hy bles is dat hierdie Slughorn met sy dik, blink, strooikleurige hare vir hom heeltemal verkeerd lyk; dit lyk of hy vir sy kop ’n strooidak laat opsit het, al is daar alreeds ’n blink bles kol so groot soos ’n Galjoen op sy kroontjie. Sy snor is nie so welig soos deesdae nie en is gemmerblond. Hy is nie heeltemal so geset soos die Slughorn wat Harry ken nie, maar die goue knope aan sy ryklik geborduurde onderbaadjie is al onder ’n taamlike mate van spanning. Sy klein voetjies rus op ’n fluweelpoef; hy sit ontspanne terug in ’n gemaklike breëarmleunstoel; een hand hou ’n glas wyn vas en die ander een soek deur ’n boks versuikerde pynappelringe.

Harry kyk om toe Dumbledore langs hom verskyn en sien hulle staan in Slughorn se kantoor. Daar sit 'n halfdosyn seuns om Slughorn, almal op harder of laer stoele as hy en almal in hul mid-deltienerjare. Harry herken Riddle onmiddellik. Hy is die aantreklikste en hy lyk ook meer op sy gemak as die ander seuns. Sy regterhand rus ongeërg op sy stoel se armleuning; Harry besef met 'n skok hy dra Marvolo se goue en swart ring; hy het sy pa alreeds vermoor.

"Professor, is dit waar dat professor Merrythought gaan aftree?" vra Riddle.

"Tom, Tom, ek kan jou nie sê nie, al weet ek ook," antwoord Slughorn en waai vermanend 'n vinger vol suiker vir Riddle, hoewel hy die hele effek ietwat ruïneer deur oog te knip. "Ek moet sê, ek sal graag wil weet waar jy jou inligting vandaan kry, seun; jy weet meer as die helfte van die personeel."

Riddle glimlag; die ander seuns lag en kyk hom vol bewondering aan.

"Met jou uitsonderlike vermoë om dinge te weet wat jy nie behoort te weet nie en die noukeurige manier waarop jy die mense wat saak maak, vlei – terloops, dankie vir die pynappels; jy's heeltemal reg, dit is my gunsteling –"

Terwyl 'n hele paar van die seuns giggel, gebeur daar iets baie eienaardigs. Die hele vertrek is skielik gevul met 'n dik wit miswolk sodat Harry nie Dumbledore se gesig kan sien nie, al staan hy langs hom. Dan hoor hy Slughorn se stem onnatuurlik hard deur die mis eggo: "*– jy gaan nog die pad byster raak, seun, let op my woorde.*"

Die mis verdwyn so skielik as wat dit verskyn het en desnieteenstaande maak niemand daarvan melding nie en niemand lyk of daar iets buitengewoons gebeur het nie. Harry kyk verskrik om toe 'n klein goue horlosie wat op Slughorn se lessenaar staan elfuur slaan.

"Goeie genugtig, is dit al so laat?" sê Slughorn. "Julle beter spore maak, seuns, of ons gaan almal in die moeilikheid kom. Lestrangle, ek wil jou opstel teen môre hê of jy kry detensie. Dieselfde geld jou, Avery."

Slughorn trek homself uit sy leunstoel op en neem sy leë glas na die lessenaar terwyl die seuns uitloop. Riddle bly egter agter. Harry kan sien hy het opsetlik gedraai, want hy wil laaste in die vertrek saam met Slughorn wees.

"Lig loop, Tom," sê Slughorn toe hy omdraai en sien hy is nog steeds daar. "Jy wil nie ná ure buite jou bed gevang word nie en jy's 'n prefek ..."

"Professor, daar's iets wat ek u graag wil vra."

"Nou vra gerus, ou seun, vra gerus ..."

“Ek het gewonder wat weet professor van ... van Horcruxe?”

En daar gebeur dit weer: digte mis vul die kamer sodat Harry Slughorn en Riddle glad nie kan sien nie, net vir Dumbledore wat met 'n rustige glimlag langs hom staan. Dan bulder Slughorn se stem weer net soos voorheen.

“Ek weet niks van Horcruxe af nie, en al hét ek ook, sal ek jou nie sê nie! Maak nou dadelik dat jy hier wegkom en moenie dat ek jou vang dat jy dit ooit weer noem nie!”

“Wel, dis al,” sê Dumbledore kalm langs Harry. “Tyd om te gaan.”

En Harry se voete lig van die vloer af op, net om sekondes later weer op die mat voor Dumbledore se lessenaar te land.

“Was dit al?” vra Harry onbegrypend.

Dumbledore het gesê dit is die belangrikste herinnering van almal, maar hy kan nie verstaan hoekom dit so betekenisvol is nie. Toegee, die mis en die feit dat niemand blykbaar iets agtergekom het nie, is vreemd, maar afgesien daarvan het dit gelyk of daar niks gebeur nie, behalwe dat Riddle 'n vraag gevra en nie 'n antwoord daarop gekry het nie.

“Soos jy sekerlik opgemerk het,” begin Dumbledore terwyl hy weer agter sy lessenaar gaan sit, “is daar met daardie herinnering gepeuter.”

“Gepeuter?” herhaal Harry en gaan sit ook weer.

“Ongetwyfeld,” sê Dumbledore. “Professor Slughorn het met sy eie herinneringe gelol.”

“Maar hoekom sou hy dit gedoen het?”

“Want ek dink hy skaam hom vir wat hy onthou,” sê Dumbledore. “Hy het die herinnering probeer wysig om homself in 'n beter lig te stel. Hy het die gedeeltes wat hy nie wil hê ek moet sien nie, uitgewis. Soos jy gesien het, is dit baie ruweg gedoen, en dit is 'n goeie teken, want dit wys dat die ware herinnering nog steeds daar onder die veranderings skuil.

“En daarom wil ek vir die eerste keer vir jou huiswerk gee, Harry. Dit gaan jou taak wees om professor Slughorn te oortuig om die ware herinnering aan ons te onthul, want dit sal ongetwyfeld die mees deurslaggewende brokkie inligting van almal wees.”

Harry staar hom aan.

“Maar professor,” sê hy en hou sy stem so eerbiedig moontlik, “u het my nie nodig nie – u kan Legilimensie gebruik ... of Veritaserum ...”

“Professor Slughorn is 'n baie bedrewe towenaar wat albei te wagte sal wees,” sê Dumbledore. “Hy is baie bekwaam in Okklumensie as arme Morfin Gaunt, en ek sal verstom wees as hy nie

altyd 'n teenmideel vir Veritaserum by hom dra vandat ek hom gedwing het om hierdie parodie van 'n herinnering vir my te gee nie.

“Nee, ek dink dit sal dwaas wees om die waarheid met geweld uit professor Slughorn te probeer mergel en dit sal dalk meer skade as goed doen; ek wil nie hê hy moet Hogwarts verlaat nie. Hy het egter soos ons almal sy swakhede en ek glo jy is die een persoon wat dalk deur sy skanse sal kan breek. Dit is baie belangrik dat ons die ware herinnering kry, Harry ... Ons sal eers weet hóé belangrik wanneer ons die regte gebeure sien. So sterkte ... en goeienag.”

Harry voel 'n bietjie afgehaal dat hy so summier uitgestuur word, maar staan dadelik op.

“Goeienag, professor.”

Toe hy die kantoor se deur agter hom toemaak, hoor hy duidelik hoe Phineas Nigellus sê: “Ek kan nie sien hoekom die seun dit beter as jy sal kan doen nie, Dumbledore.”

“Ek verwag nie jy kan nie, Phineas,” antwoord Dumbledore en Fawkes gee nog 'n lae, musikale kreet.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



BIRTHDAY SURPRISES

The next day Harry confided in both Ron and Hermione the task that Dumbledore had set him, though separately, for Hermione still refused to remain in Ron's presence longer than it took to give him a contemptuous look.

Ron thought that Harry was unlikely to have any trouble with Slughorn at all.

"He loves you," he said over breakfast, waving an airy forkful of fried egg. "Won't refuse you anything, will he? Not his little Potions Prince. Just hang back after class this afternoon and ask him."

Hermione, however, took a gloomier view. "He must be determined to hide what really happened if Dumbledore couldn't get it out of him," she said in a low voice, as they stood in the deserted, snowy courtyard at break. "Horcruxes . . . *Horcruxes* . . . I've never

even heard of them. . . .”

“You haven’t?” Harry was disappointed; he had hoped that Hermione might have been able to give him a clue as to what Horcruxes were.

“They must be really advanced Dark Magic, or why would Voldemort have wanted to know about them? I think it’s going to be difficult to get the information, Harry, you’ll have to be very careful about how you approach Slughorn, think out a strategy. . . .”

“Ron reckons I should just hang back after Potions this afternoon. . . .”

“Oh, well, if *Won-Won* thinks that, you’d better do it,” she said, flaring up at once. “After all, when has *Won-Won’s* judgment ever been faulty?”

“Hermione, can’t you — ?”

“*No!*” she said angrily, and stormed away, leaving Harry alone and ankle-deep in snow.

Potions lessons were uncomfortable enough these days, seeing as Harry, Ron, and Hermione had to share a desk. Today, Hermione moved her cauldron around the table so that she was close to Ernie, and ignored both Harry and Ron.

“What’ve *you* done?” Ron muttered to Harry, looking at Hermione’s haughty profile.

But before Harry could answer, Slughorn was calling for silence from the front of the room.

“Settle down, settle down, please! Quickly, now, lots of work to get through this afternoon! Golpalott’s Third Law . . . who can tell me — ? But Miss Granger can, of course!”

Hermione recited at top speed: “Golpalott’s-Third-Law-states-that-the-antidote-for-a-blended-poison-will-be-equal-to-more-than-the-sum-of-the-antidotes-for-each-of-the-separate-components.”

“Precisely!” beamed Slughorn. “Ten points for Gryffindor! Now, if we accept Golpalott’s Third Law as true . . .”

Harry was going to have to take Slughorn’s word for it that Golpalott’s Third Law was true, because he had not understood any of it. Nobody apart from Hermione seemed to be following what Slughorn said next either.

“. . . which means, of course, that assuming we have achieved correct identification of the potion’s ingredients by Scarpin’s Revelaspell, our primary aim is not the relatively simple one of selecting antidotes to those ingredients in and of themselves, but to find that added component that will, by an almost alchemical process, transform these disparate elements —”

Ron was sitting beside Harry with his mouth half open, doodling absently on his new copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. Ron kept forgetting that he could no longer rely on Hermione to help him out of trouble when he failed to grasp what was going on.

“. . . and so,” finished Slughorn, “I want each of you to come and take one of these phials from my desk. You are to create an antidote for the poison within it before the end of the lesson. Good luck, and don’t forget your protective gloves!”

Hermione had left her stool and was halfway toward Slughorn’s desk before the rest of the class had realized it was time to move, and by the time Harry, Ron, and Ernie returned to the table, she had already tipped the contents of her phial into her cauldron and was

kindling a fire underneath it.

“It’s a shame that the Prince won’t be able to help you much with this, Harry,” she said brightly as she straightened up. “You have to understand the principles involved this time. No shortcuts or cheats!”

Annoyed, Harry uncorked the poison he had taken from Slughorn’s desk, which was a garish shade of pink, tipped it into his cauldron, and lit a fire underneath it. He did not have the faintest idea what he was supposed to do next. He glanced around at Ron, who was now standing there looking rather gormless, having copied everything Harry had done.

“You sure the Prince hasn’t got any tips?” Ron muttered to Harry.

Harry pulled out his trusty copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* and turned to the chapter on antidotes. There was Golpalott’s Third Law, stated word for word as Hermione had recited it, but not a single illuminating note in the Prince’s hand to explain what it meant. Apparently the Prince, like Hermione, had had no difficulty understanding it.

“Nothing,” said Harry gloomily.

Hermione was now waving her wand enthusiastically over her cauldron. Unfortunately, they could not copy the spell she was doing because she was now so good at nonverbal incantations that she did not need to say the words aloud. Ernie Macmillan, however, was muttering, “*Specialis Revelio!*” over his cauldron, which sounded impressive, so Harry and Ron hastened to imitate him.

It took Harry only five minutes to realize that his reputation as the best potion-maker in the class was crashing around his ears. Slughorn had peered hopefully into his cauldron on his first circuit of the

dungeon, preparing to exclaim in delight as he usually did, and instead had withdrawn his head hastily, coughing, as the smell of bad eggs overwhelmed him. Hermione's expression could not have been any smugger; she had loathed being outperformed in every Potions class. She was now decanting the mysteriously separated ingredients of her poison into ten different crystal phials. More to avoid watching this irritating sight than anything else, Harry bent over the Half-Blood Prince's book and turned a few pages with unnecessary force.

And there it was, scrawled right across a long list of antidotes:

Just shove a bezoar down their throats.

Harry stared at these words for a moment. Hadn't he once, long ago, heard of bezoars? Hadn't Snape mentioned them in their first-ever Potions lesson? "*A stone taken from the stomach of a goat, which will protect from most poisons.*"

It was not an answer to the Golpalott problem, and had Snape still been their teacher, Harry would not have dared do it, but this was a moment for desperate measures. He hastened toward the store cupboard and rummaged within it, pushing aside unicorn horns and tangles of dried herbs until he found, at the very back, a small cardboard box on which had been scribbled the word BEZOARS.

He opened the box just as Slughorn called, "Two minutes left, everyone!" Inside were half a dozen shriveled brown objects, looking more like dried-up kidneys than real stones. Harry seized one, put the box back in the cupboard, and hurried back to his cauldron.

“Time’s . . . UP!” called Slughorn genially. “Well, let’s see how you’ve done! Blaise . . . what have you got for me?”

Slowly, Slughorn moved around the room, examining the various antidotes. Nobody had finished the task, although Hermione was trying to cram a few more ingredients into her bottle before Slughorn reached her. Ron had given up completely, and was merely trying to avoid breathing in the putrid fumes issuing from his cauldron. Harry stood there waiting, the bezoar clutched in a slightly sweaty hand.

Slughorn reached their table last. He sniffed Ernie’s potion and passed on to Ron’s with a grimace. He did not linger over Ron’s cauldron, but backed away swiftly, retching slightly.

“And you, Harry,” he said. “What have you got to show me?”

Harry held out his hand, the bezoar sitting on his palm.

Slughorn looked down at it for a full ten seconds. Harry wondered, for a moment, whether he was going to shout at him. Then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

“You’ve got nerve, boy!” he boomed, taking the bezoar and holding it up so that the class could see it. “Oh, you’re like your mother. . . . Well, I can’t fault you. . . . A bezoar would certainly act as an antidote to all these potions!”

Hermione, who was sweaty-faced and had soot on her nose, looked livid. Her half-finished antidote, comprising fifty-two ingredients, including a chunk of her own hair, bubbled sluggishly behind Slughorn, who had eyes for nobody but Harry.

“And you thought of a bezoar all by yourself, did you, Harry?” she asked through gritted teeth.

“That’s the individual spirit a real potion-maker needs!” said

Slughorn happily, before Harry could reply. “Just like his mother, she had the same intuitive grasp of potion-making, it’s undoubtedly from Lily he gets it. . . . Yes, Harry, yes, if you’ve got a bezoar to hand, of course that would do the trick . . . although as they don’t work on everything, and are pretty rare, it’s still worth knowing how to mix antidotes. . . .”

The only person in the room looking angrier than Hermione was Malfoy, who, Harry was pleased to see, had spilled something that looked like cat-sick over himself. Before either of them could express their fury that Harry had come top of the class by not doing any work, however, the bell rang.

“Time to pack up!” said Slughorn. “And an extra ten points to Gryffindor for sheer cheek!”

Still chuckling, he waddled back to his desk at the front of the dungeon.

Harry dawdled behind, taking an inordinate amount of time to do up his bag. Neither Ron nor Hermione wished him luck as they left; both looked rather annoyed. At last Harry and Slughorn were the only two left in the room.

“Come on, now, Harry, you’ll be late for your next lesson,” said Slughorn affably, snapping the gold clasps shut on his dragon-skin briefcase.

“Sir,” said Harry, reminding himself irresistibly of Voldemort, “I wanted to ask you something.”

“Ask away, then, my dear boy, ask away. . . .”

“Sir, I wondered what you know about . . . about Horcruxes?”

Slughorn froze. His round face seemed to sink in upon itself. He

licked his lips and said hoarsely, “What did you say?”

“I asked whether you know anything about Horcruxes, sir. You see —”

“Dumbledore put you up to this,” whispered Slughorn. His voice had changed completely. It was not genial anymore, but shocked, terrified. He fumbled in his breast pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, mopping his sweating brow. “Dumbledore’s shown you that — that memory. Well? Hasn’t he?”

“Yes,” said Harry, deciding on the spot that it was best not to lie.

“Yes, of course,” said Slughorn quietly, still dabbing at his white face. “Of course . . . well, if you’ve seen that memory, Harry, you’ll know that I don’t know anything — *anything*” — he repeated the word forcefully — “about Horcruxes.”

He seized his dragon-skin briefcase, stuffed his handkerchief back into his pocket, and marched to the dungeon door.

“Sir,” said Harry desperately, “I just thought there might be a bit more to the memory —”

“Did you?” said Slughorn. “Then you were wrong, weren’t you? WRONG!”

He bellowed the last word and, before Harry could say another word, slammed the dungeon door behind him.

Neither Ron nor Hermione was at all sympathetic when Harry told them of this disastrous interview. Hermione was still seething at the way Harry had triumphed without doing the work properly. Ron was resentful that Harry hadn’t slipped him a bezoar too.

“It would’ve just looked stupid if we’d both done it!” said Harry irritably. “Look, I had to try and soften him up so I could ask him

about Voldemort, didn't I? Oh, will you *get a grip!*" he added in exasperation, as Ron winced at the sound of the name.

Infuriated by his failure and by Ron's and Hermione's attitudes, Harry brooded for the next few days over what to do next about Slughorn. He decided that, for the time being, he would let Slughorn think that he had forgotten all about Horcruxes; it was surely best to lull him into a false sense of security before returning to the attack.

When Harry did not question Slughorn again, the Potions master reverted to his usual affectionate treatment of him, and appeared to have put the matter from his mind. Harry awaited an invitation to one of his little evening parties, determined to accept this time, even if he had to reschedule Quidditch practice. Unfortunately, however, no such invitation arrived. Harry checked with Hermione and Ginny: Neither of them had received an invitation and nor, as far as they knew, had anybody else. Harry could not help wondering whether this meant that Slughorn was not quite as forgetful as he appeared, simply determined to give Harry no additional opportunities to question him.

Meanwhile, the Hogwarts library had failed Hermione for the first time in living memory. She was so shocked, she even forgot that she was annoyed at Harry for his trick with the bezoar.

"I haven't found one single explanation of what Horcruxes do!" she told him. "Not a single one! I've been right through the restricted section and even in the most *horrible* books, where they tell you how to brew the most *gruesome* potions — nothing! All I could find was this, in the introduction to *Magick Moste Evile* — listen — 'Of the Horcrux, wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor

give direction. . . .’ I mean, why mention it then?” she said impatiently, slamming the old book shut; it let out a ghostly wail. “Oh, shut up,” she snapped, stuffing it back into her bag.

The snow melted around the school as February arrived, to be replaced by cold, dreary wetness. Purplish-gray clouds hung low over the castle and a constant fall of chilly rain made the lawns slippery and muddy. The upshot of this was that the sixth years’ first Apparition lesson, which was scheduled for a Saturday morning so that no normal lessons would be missed, took place in the Great Hall instead of in the grounds.

When Harry and Hermione arrived in the Hall (Ron had come down with Lavender), they found that the tables had disappeared. Rain lashed against the high windows and the enchanted ceiling swirled darkly above them as they assembled in front of Professors McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, and Sprout — the Heads of Houses — and a small wizard whom Harry took to be the Apparition instructor from the Ministry. He was oddly colorless, with transparent eyelashes, wispy hair, and an insubstantial air, as though a single gust of wind might blow him away. Harry wondered whether constant disappearances and reappearances had somehow diminished his substance, or whether this frail build was ideal for anyone wishing to vanish.

“Good morning,” said the Ministry wizard, when all the students had arrived and the Heads of Houses had called for quiet. “My name is Wilkie Twycross and I shall be your Ministry Apparition instructor for the next twelve weeks. I hope to be able to prepare you for your Apparition Tests in this time —”

“Malfoy, be quiet and pay attention!” barked Professor McGonagall.

Everybody looked around. Malfoy had flushed a dull pink; he looked furious as he stepped away from Crabbe, with whom he appeared to have been having a whispered argument. Harry glanced quickly at Snape, who also looked annoyed, though Harry strongly suspected that this was less because of Malfoy’s rudeness than the fact that McGonagall had reprimanded one of his House.

“— by which time, many of you may be ready to take your tests,” Twycross continued, as though there had been no interruption.

“As you may know, it is usually impossible to Apparate or Disapparate within Hogwarts. The headmaster has lifted this enchantment, purely within the Great Hall, for one hour, so as to enable you to practice. May I emphasize that you will not be able to Apparate outside the walls of this Hall, and that you would be unwise to try.

“I would like each of you to place yourselves now so that you have a clear five feet of space in front of you.”

There was a great scrambling and jostling as people separated, banged into each other, and ordered others out of their space. The Heads of Houses moved among the students, marshaling them into position and breaking up arguments.

“Harry, where are you going?” demanded Hermione.

But Harry did not answer; he was moving quickly through the crowd, past the place where Professor Flitwick was making squeaky attempts to position a few Ravenclaws, all of whom wanted to be near the front, past Professor Sprout, who was chivying the

Hufflepuffs into line, until, by dodging around Ernie Macmillan, he managed to position himself right at the back of the crowd, directly behind Malfoy, who was taking advantage of the general upheaval to continue his argument with Crabbe, standing five feet away and looking mutinous.

“I don’t know how much longer, all right?” Malfoy shot at him, oblivious to Harry standing right behind him. “It’s taking longer than I thought it would.”

Crabbe opened his mouth, but Malfoy appeared to second-guess what he was going to say. “Look, it’s none of your business what I’m doing, Crabbe, you and Goyle just do as you’re told and keep a lookout!”

“I tell my friends what I’m up to, if I want them to keep a lookout for me,” Harry said, just loud enough for Malfoy to hear him.

Malfoy spun around on the spot, his hand flying to his wand, but at that precise moment the four Heads of House shouted, “Quiet!” and silence fell again. Malfoy turned slowly to face the front again.

“Thank you,” said Twycross. “Now then . . .”

He waved his wand. Old-fashioned wooden hoops instantly appeared on the floor in front of every student.

“The important things to remember when Apparating are the three D’s!” said Twycross. “Destination, Determination, Deliberation!”

“Step one: Fix your mind firmly upon the desired *destination*,” said Twycross. “In this case, the interior of your hoop. Kindly concentrate upon that destination now.”

Everybody looked around furtively to check that everyone else was staring into their hoop, then hastily did as they were told. Harry

gazed at the circular patch of dusty floor enclosed by his hoop and tried hard to think of nothing else. This proved impossible, as he couldn't stop puzzling over what Malfoy was doing that needed lookouts.

“Step two,” said Twycross, “focus your *determination* to occupy the visualized space! Let your yearning to enter it flood from your mind to every particle of your body!”

Harry glanced around surreptitiously. A little way to his left, Ernie Macmillan was contemplating his hoop so hard that his face had turned pink; it looked as though he was straining to lay a Quaffle-sized egg. Harry bit back a laugh and hastily returned his gaze to his own hoop.

“Step three,” called Twycross, “and only when I give the command . . . Turn on the spot, feeling your way into nothingness, moving with *deliberation*! On my command, now . . . one —”

Harry glanced around again; lots of people were looking positively alarmed at being asked to Apparate so quickly.

“— two —”

Harry tried to fix his thoughts on his hoop again; he had already forgotten what the three D's stood for.

“— THREE!”

Harry spun on the spot, lost balance, and nearly fell over. He was not the only one. The whole Hall was suddenly full of staggering people; Neville was flat on his back; Ernie Macmillan, on the other hand, had done a kind of pirouetting leap into his hoop and looked momentarily thrilled, until he caught sight of Dean Thomas roaring with laughter at him.

“Never mind, never mind,” said Twycross dryly, who did not seem to have expected anything better. “Adjust your hoops, please, and back to your original positions. . . .”

The second attempt was no better than the first. The third was just as bad. Not until the fourth did anything exciting happen. There was a horrible screech of pain and everybody looked around, terrified, to see Susan Bones of Hufflepuff wobbling in her hoop with her left leg still standing five feet away where she had started.

The Heads of House converged on her; there was a great bang and a puff of purple smoke, which cleared to reveal Susan sobbing, reunited with her leg but looking horrified.

“Splinching, or the separation of random body parts,” said Wilkie Twycross dispassionately, “occurs when the mind is insufficiently *determined*. You must concentrate continuously upon your *destination*, and move, without haste, but with *deliberation* . . . thus.”

Twycross stepped forward, turned gracefully on the spot with his arms outstretched, and vanished in a swirl of robes, reappearing at the back of the Hall.

“Remember the three D’s,” he said, “and try again . . . one — two — three —”

But an hour later, Susan’s Splinching was still the most interesting thing that had happened. Twycross did not seem discouraged. Fastening his cloak at his neck, he merely said, “Until next Saturday, everybody, and do not forget: *Destination*. *Determination*. *Deliberation*.”

With that, he waved his wand, Vanishing the hoops, and walked out

of the Hall accompanied by Professor McGonagall. Talk broke out at once as people began moving toward the entrance hall.

“How did you do?” asked Ron, hurrying toward Harry. “I think I felt something the last time I tried — a kind of tingling in my feet.”

“I expect your trainers are too small, Won-Won,” said a voice behind them, and Hermione stalked past, smirking.

“I didn’t feel anything,” said Harry, ignoring this interruption. “But I don’t care about that now —”

“What d’you mean, you don’t care? Don’t you want to learn to Apparate?” said Ron incredulously.

“I’m not fussed, really, I prefer flying,” said Harry, glancing over his shoulder to see where Malfoy was, and speeding up as they came into the entrance hall. “Look, hurry up, will you, there’s something I want to do. . . .”

Perplexed, Ron followed Harry back to the Gryffindor Tower at a run. They were temporarily detained by Peeves, who had jammed a door on the fourth floor shut and was refusing to let anyone pass until they set fire to their own pants, but Harry and Ron simply turned back and took one of their trusted shortcuts. Within five minutes, they were climbing through the portrait hole.

“Are you going to tell me what we’re doing, then?” asked Ron, panting slightly.

“Up here,” said Harry, and he crossed the common room and led the way through the door to the boys’ staircase.

Their dormitory was, as Harry had hoped, empty. He flung open his trunk and began to rummage in it, while Ron watched impatiently.

“Harry . . .”

“Malfoy’s using Crabbe and Goyle as lookouts. He was arguing with Crabbe just now. I want to know — aha.”

He had found it, a folded square of apparently blank parchment, which he now smoothed out and tapped with the tip of his wand.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good . . . or Malfoy is anyway.”

At once, the Marauder’s Map appeared on the parchment’s surface. Here was a detailed plan of every one of the castle’s floors and, moving around it, the tiny, labeled black dots that signified each of the castle’s occupants.

“Help me find Malfoy,” said Harry urgently.

He laid the map upon his bed, and he and Ron leaned over it, searching.

“There!” said Ron, after a minute or so. “He’s in the Slytherin common room, look . . . with Parkinson and Zabini and Crabbe and Goyle . . .”

Harry looked down at the map, disappointed, but rallied almost at once.

“Well, I’m keeping an eye on him from now on,” he said firmly. “And the moment I see him lurking somewhere with Crabbe and Goyle keeping watch outside, it’ll be on with the old Invisibility Cloak and off to find out what he’s —”

He broke off as Neville entered the dormitory, bringing with him a strong smell of singed material, and began rummaging in his trunk for a fresh pair of pants.

Despite his determination to catch Malfoy out, Harry had no luck at all over the next couple of weeks. Although he consulted the map

as often as he could, sometimes making unnecessary visits to the bathroom between lessons to search it, he did not once see Malfoy anywhere suspicious. Admittedly, he spotted Crabbe and Goyle moving around the castle on their own more often than usual, sometimes remaining stationary in deserted corridors, but at these times Malfoy was not only nowhere near them, but impossible to locate on the map at all. This was most mysterious. Harry toyed with the possibility that Malfoy was actually leaving the school grounds, but could not see how he could be doing it, given the very high level of security now operating within the castle. He could only suppose that he was missing Malfoy amongst the hundreds of tiny black dots upon the map. As for the fact that Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle appeared to be going their different ways when they were usually inseparable, these things happened as people got older — Ron and Hermione, Harry reflected sadly, were living proof.

February moved toward March with no change in the weather except that it became windy as well as wet. To general indignation, a sign went up on all common room notice boards that the next trip into Hogsmeade had been canceled. Ron was furious.

“It was on my birthday!” he said. “I was looking forward to that!”

“Not a big surprise, though, is it?” said Harry. “Not after what happened to Katie.”

She had still not returned from St. Mungo’s. What was more, further disappearances had been reported in the *Daily Prophet*, including several relatives of students at Hogwarts.

“But now all I’ve got to look forward to is stupid Apparition!” said Ron grumpily. “Big birthday treat . . .”

Three lessons on, Apparition was proving as difficult as ever, though a few more people had managed to Splinch themselves. Frustration was running high and there was a certain amount of ill-feeling toward Wilkie Twycross and his three D's, which had inspired a number of nicknames for him, the politest of which were Dogbreath and Dunghead.

“Happy birthday, Ron,” said Harry, when they were woken on the first of March by Seamus and Dean leaving noisily for breakfast. “Have a present.”

He threw the package across onto Ron's bed, where it joined a small pile of them that must, Harry assumed, have been delivered by house-elves in the night.

“Cheers,” said Ron drowsily and, as he ripped off the paper, Harry got out of bed, opened his own trunk, and began rummaging in it for the Marauder's Map, which he hid after every use. He turfed out half the contents of his trunk before he found it hiding beneath the rolled-up socks in which he was still keeping his bottle of lucky potion, Felix Felicis.

“Right,” he murmured, taking it back to bed with him, tapping it quietly and murmuring, *“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,”* so that Neville, who was passing the foot of his bed at the time, would not hear.

“Nice one, Harry!” said Ron enthusiastically, waving the new pair of Quidditch Keeper's gloves Harry had given him.

“No problem,” said Harry absentmindedly, as he searched the Slytherin dormitory closely for Malfoy. “Hey . . . I don't think he's in his bed. . . .”

Ron did not answer; he was too busy unwrapping presents, every now and then letting out an exclamation of pleasure.

“Seriously good haul this year!” he announced, holding up a heavy gold watch with odd symbols around the edge and tiny moving stars instead of hands. “See what Mum and Dad got me? Blimey, I think I’ll come of age next year too. . . .”

“Cool,” muttered Harry, sparing the watch a glance before peering more closely at the map. Where was Malfoy? He did not seem to be at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, eating breakfast. . . . He was nowhere near Snape, who was sitting in his study. . . . He wasn’t in any of the bathrooms or in the hospital wing. . . .

“Want one?” said Ron thickly, holding out a box of Chocolate Cauldrons.

“No thanks,” said Harry, looking up. “Malfoy’s gone again!”

“Can’t have done,” said Ron, stuffing a second Cauldron into his mouth as he slid out of bed to get dressed. “Come on, if you don’t hurry up, you’ll have to Apparate on an empty stomach. . . . Might make it easier, I suppose . . .” Ron looked thoughtfully at the box of Chocolate Cauldrons, then shrugged and helped himself to a third.

Harry tapped the map with his wand, muttered, “Mischief managed,” though it hadn’t been, and got dressed, thinking hard. There had to be an explanation for Malfoy’s periodic disappearances, but he simply could not think what it could be. The best way of finding out would be to tail him, but even with the Invisibility Cloak this was an impractical idea: Harry had lessons, Quidditch practice, homework, and Apparition; he could not follow Malfoy around school all day without his absence being remarked

upon.

“Ready?” he said to Ron.

He was halfway to the dormitory door when he realized that Ron had not moved, but was leaning on his bedpost, staring out of the rain-washed window with a strangely unfocused look on his face.

“Ron? Breakfast.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Harry stared at him.

“I thought you just said — ?”

“Well, all right, I’ll come down with you,” sighed Ron, “but I don’t want to eat.”

Harry scrutinized him suspiciously.

“You’ve just eaten half a box of Chocolate Cauldrons, haven’t you?”

“It’s not that,” Ron sighed again. “You . . . you wouldn’t understand.”

“Fair enough,” said Harry, albeit puzzled, as he turned to open the door.

“Harry!” said Ron suddenly.

“What?”

“Harry, I can’t stand it!”

“You can’t stand what?” asked Harry, now starting to feel definitely alarmed. Ron was rather pale and looked as though he was about to be sick.

“I can’t stop thinking about her!” said Ron hoarsely.

Harry gaped at him. He had not expected this and was not sure he

wanted to hear it. Friends they might be, but if Ron started calling Lavender “Lav-Lav,” he would have to put his foot down.

“Why does that stop you having breakfast?” Harry asked, trying to inject a note of common sense into the proceedings.

“I don’t think she knows I exist,” said Ron with a desperate gesture.

“She definitely knows you exist,” said Harry, bewildered. “She keeps snogging you, doesn’t she?”

Ron blinked. “Who are you talking about?”

“Who are *you* talking about?” said Harry, with an increasing sense that all reason had dropped out of the conversation.

“Romilda Vane,” said Ron softly, and his whole face seemed to illuminate as he said it, as though hit by a ray of purest sunlight.

They stared at each other for almost a whole minute, before Harry said, “This is a joke, right? You’re joking.”

“I think . . . Harry, I think I love her,” said Ron in a strangled voice.

“Okay,” said Harry, walking up to Ron to get a better look at the glazed eyes and the pallid complexion, “okay . . . Say that again with a straight face.”

“I love her,” repeated Ron breathlessly. “Have you seen her hair, it’s all black and shiny and silky . . . and her eyes? Her big dark eyes? And her —”

“This is really funny and everything,” said Harry impatiently, “but joke’s over, all right? Drop it.”

He turned to leave; he had got two steps toward the door when a crashing blow hit him on the right ear. Staggering, he looked around.

Ron's fist was drawn right back; his face was contorted with rage; he was about to strike again.

Harry reacted instinctively; his wand was out of his pocket and the incantation sprang to mind without conscious thought: *Levicorpus!*

Ron yelled as his heel was wrenched upward once more; he dangled helplessly, upside down, his robes hanging off him.

"*What was that for?*" Harry bellowed.

"You insulted her, Harry! You said it was a joke!" shouted Ron, who was slowly turning purple in the face as all the blood rushed to his head.

"This is insane!" said Harry. "What's got into —?"

And then he saw the box lying open on Ron's bed, and the truth hit him with the force of a stampeding troll.

"Where did you get those Chocolate Cauldrons?"

"They were a birthday present!" shouted Ron, revolving slowly in midair as he struggled to get free. "I offered you one, didn't I?"

"You just picked them up off the floor, didn't you?"

"They'd fallen off my bed, all right? Let me go!"

"They didn't fall off your bed, you prat, don't you understand? They were mine, I chucked them out of my trunk when I was looking for the map, they're the Chocolate Cauldrons Romilda gave me before Christmas, and they're all spiked with love potion!"

But only one word of this seemed to have registered with Ron.

"Romilda?" he repeated. "Did you say Romilda? Harry — do you know her? Can you introduce me?"

Harry stared at the dangling Ron, whose face now looked

tremendously hopeful, and fought a strong desire to laugh. A part of him — the part closest to his throbbing right ear — was quite keen on the idea of letting Ron down and watching him run amok until the effects of the potion wore off. . . . But on the other hand, they were supposed to be friends, Ron had not been himself when he had attacked, and Harry thought that he would deserve another punching if he permitted Ron to declare undying love for Romilda Vane.

“Yeah, I’ll introduce you,” said Harry, thinking fast. “I’m going to let you down now, okay?”

He sent Ron crashing back to the floor (his ear did hurt quite a lot), but Ron simply bounded to his feet again, grinning.

“She’ll be in Slughorn’s office,” said Harry confidently, leading the way to the door.

“Why will she be in there?” asked Ron anxiously, hurrying to keep up.

“Oh, she has extra Potions lessons with him,” said Harry, inventing wildly.

“Maybe I could ask if I can have them with her?” said Ron eagerly.

“Great idea,” said Harry.

Lavender was waiting beside the portrait hole, a complication Harry had not foreseen.

“You’re late, Won-Won!” she pouted. “I’ve got you a birthday —”

“Leave me alone,” said Ron impatiently. “Harry’s going to introduce me to Romilda Vane.”

And without another word to her, he pushed his way out of the portrait hole. Harry tried to make an apologetic face to Lavender, but it might have turned out simply amused, because she looked more

offended than ever as the Fat Lady swung shut behind them.

Harry had been slightly worried that Slughorn might be at breakfast, but he answered his office door at the first knock, wearing a green velvet dressing gown and matching nightcap and looking rather bleary-eyed.

“Harry,” he mumbled. “This is very early for a call. . . . I generally sleep late on a Saturday. . . .”

“Professor, I’m really sorry to disturb you,” said Harry as quietly as possible, while Ron stood on tiptoe, attempting to see past Slughorn into his room, “but my friend Ron’s swallowed a love potion by mistake. You couldn’t make him an antidote, could you? I’d take him to Madam Pomfrey, but we’re not supposed to have anything from Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes and, you know . . . awkward questions . . .”

“I’d have thought you could have whipped him up a remedy, Harry, an expert potioneer like you?” asked Slughorn.

“Er,” said Harry, somewhat distracted by the fact that Ron was now elbowing him in the ribs in an attempt to force his way into the room, “well, I’ve never mixed an antidote for a love potion, sir, and by the time I get it right, Ron might’ve done something serious —”

Helpfully, Ron chose this moment to moan, “I can’t see her, Harry — is he hiding her?”

“Was this potion within date?” asked Slughorn, now eyeing Ron with professional interest. “They can strengthen, you know, the longer they’re kept.”

“That would explain a lot,” panted Harry, now positively wrestling with Ron to keep him from knocking Slughorn over. “It’s

his birthday, Professor,” he added imploringly.

“Oh, all right, come in, then, come in,” said Slughorn, relenting. “I’ve got the necessary here in my bag, it’s not a difficult antidote. . . .”

Ron burst through the door into Slughorn’s overheated, crowded study, tripped over a tasseled footstool, regained his balance by seizing Harry around the neck, and muttered, “She didn’t see that, did she?”

“She’s not here yet,” said Harry, watching Slughorn opening his potion kit and adding a few pinches of this and that to a small crystal bottle.

“That’s good,” said Ron fervently. “How do I look?”

“Very handsome,” said Slughorn smoothly, handing Ron a glass of clear liquid. “Now drink that up, it’s a tonic for the nerves, keep you calm when she arrives, you know.”

“Brilliant,” said Ron eagerly, and he gulped the antidote down noisily.

Harry and Slughorn watched him. For a moment, Ron beamed at them. Then, very slowly, his grin sagged and vanished, to be replaced by an expression of utmost horror.

“Back to normal, then?” said Harry, grinning. Slughorn chuckled. “Thanks a lot, Professor.”

“Don’t mention it, m’boy, don’t mention it,” said Slughorn, as Ron collapsed into a nearby armchair, looking devastated. “Pick-me-up, that’s what he needs,” Slughorn continued, now bustling over to a table loaded with drinks. “I’ve got butterbeer, I’ve got wine, I’ve got one last bottle of this oak-matured mead . . . hmm . . . meant to give

that to Dumbledore for Christmas . . . ah, well . . .” He shrugged. “He can’t miss what he’s never had! Why don’t we open it now and celebrate Mr. Weasley’s birthday? Nothing like a fine spirit to chase away the pangs of disappointed love. . . .”

He chortled again, and Harry joined in. This was the first time he had found himself almost alone with Slughorn since his disastrous first attempt to extract the true memory from him. Perhaps, if he could just keep Slughorn in a good mood . . . perhaps if they got through enough of the oak-matured mead . . .

“There you are then,” said Slughorn, handing Harry and Ron a glass of mead each before raising his own. “Well, a very happy birthday, Ralph —”

“Ron —” whispered Harry.

But Ron, who did not appear to be listening to the toast, had already thrown the mead into his mouth and swallowed it.

There was one second, hardly more than a heartbeat, in which Harry knew there was something terribly wrong and Slughorn, it seemed, did not.

“— and may you have many more —”

“Ron!”

Ron had dropped his glass; he half-rose from his chair and then crumpled, his extremities jerking uncontrollably. Foam was dribbling from his mouth, and his eyes were bulging from their sockets.

“Professor!” Harry bellowed. “Do something!”

But Slughorn seemed paralyzed by shock. Ron twitched and choked: His skin was turning blue.

“What — but —” spluttered Slughorn.

Harry leapt over a low table and sprinted toward Slughorn's open potion kit, pulling out jars and pouches, while the terrible sound of Ron's gargling breath filled the room. Then he found it — the shriveled kidneylike stone Slughorn had taken from him in Potions.

He hurtled back to Ron's side, wrenched open his jaw, and thrust the bezoar into his mouth. Ron gave a great shudder, a rattling gasp, and his body became limp and still.

Verjaardagverrassings

Die volgende dag neem Harry vir Ron en Hermione in sy vertroue oor die taak wat Dumbledore hom gegee het, maar afsonderlik, want Hermione weier nog steeds om langer as wat dit neem om hom 'n minagtende kyk te gee, in Ron se geselskap te bly.

Ron dink nie Harry gaan enige probleme met Slughorn hê nie.

“Hy’s mal oor jou,” sê hy met ontbyt en waai ’n vurk vol gebakte eier in die lug rond. “Hy kan nie vir jou nee sê nie. Nie vir sy klein Towerdrankieprinsie nie. Bly vanmiddag ná klas en vra hom.”

Hermione is egter minder optimisties.

“Hy moet vasberade wees om dit wat regtig gebeur het, weg te steek as Dumbledore dit nie uit hom kon kry nie,” sê sy in ’n lae stem terwyl hulle pouse in die verlate, sneeubedekte binnehof staan. “Horcruxe ... *Horcruxe* ... Ek het nog nooit daarvan gehoor nie ...”

“Nie?”

Harry is teleurgesteld; hy het gehoop Hermione sal vir hom ’n leidraad kan gee oor wat Horcruxe is.

“Dit moet baie gevorderde Donker toorkuns wees, want hoekom anders sou Voldemort meer daaroor wou geweet het? Ek dink dit gaan moeilik wees om die inligting te kry, Harry. Jy sal Slughorn baie versigtig moet benader; dink aan ’n strategie ...”

“Ron reken ek moet hom vanmiddag ná Towerdrankies vra ...”

“O wel, as *Won-Won* so dink, moet jy seker so maak,” sê sy skielik opgeruk. “Per slot van rekening, wanneer het *Won-Won* al ooit ’n oordeelsfout gemaak?”

“Hermione, kan jy nie – ?”

“*Nee!*” sê sy kwaad. Sy storm weg en los hom alleen en enkeldiep in die sneeu.

Towerdrankieklasse is deesdae nogal ongemaklik, want Harry, Ron en Hermione moet ’n tafel deel. Vandag neem Hermione haar ketel na die ander punt van die tafel sodat sy naby aan Ernie is en ignoreer vir sowel Harry as Ron.

“Wat het jy gedoen?” mompel Ron vir Harry terwyl hy na Hermione se hooghartige profiel kyk.

Maar voor Harry kan antwoord, vra Slughorn van voor uit die vertrek stilte.

“Word rustig, word rustig, asseblief! Opskud, mense; ons het vanmiddag baie werk om te doen! Golpalott se Derde Wet ... Wie kan vir my sê – ? Ek is seker jy kan, juffrou Granger!”

Hermione rammel dit teen topspoed af: “Volgens-Golpalott-se-Derde-Wet-is-die-teenmiddel-vir-’n-gemengde-gifdrankie-gelyk-aan-meer-as-die-som-van-die-teenmiddels-vir-elkeen-van-die-afsonderlike-komponente.”

“Presies!” sê Slughorn stralend. “Tien punte vir Gryffindor! Nou goed, as ons aanvaar Golpalott se Derde Wet is waar ...”

Harry sal Slughorn maar net moet glo dat Golpalott se Derde Wet waar is, want hy verstaan niks daarvan nie. Dit lyk in elk geval of niemand behalwe Hermione volg wat Slughorn sê nie.

“... wat natuurlik beteken, as ons aanvaar dat ons die konkoksie se regte bestanddele met behulp van Scarpin se Revelaspreuk geïdentifiseer het, ons hoofdoelwit nie die relatief eenvoudige een is om teenmiddels vir daardie bestanddele op sigself te kies nie, maar om uit te vind wat daardie bykomende komponent is wat deur middel van ’n amper alchemistiese proses hierdie uiteenlopende elemente sal transformeer –”

Ron sit langs Harry met sy mond halfoop; hy krabbel ingedagte in sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies*. Ron vergeet aanhoudend hy kan nie meer op Hermione staatmaak om hom uit die moeilikheid te help wanneer hy nie snap wat aangaan nie.

“... en daarom,” sluit Slughorn af, “wil ek hê julle moet elkeen een van die flessies hier voor op my lessenaar kom haal. Julle moet voor die einde van die klas ’n teenmiddel vir die gifdrankie daarin optower. Sterkte, en moenie julle beskermende handskoene vergeet nie!”

Hermione spring op en is al halfpad na Slughorn se lessenaar voor die res van die klas besef dit is tyd om te beweeg, en teen die tyd dat Harry, Ron en Ernie terug by hul tafel kom, het sy haar flessie se inhoud alreeds in haar hekseketel uitgegooi en is sy besig om ’n vuurtjie daaronder te stook.

“Foeitog, die Prins gaan jou nie veel hiermee kan help nie, Harry,” sê sy opgewek terwyl sy regop kom. “Hierdie keer moet jy die beginsels wat betrokke is, verstaan. G’n kortpaaie of kroekery nie!”

Harry ontkurk die gifdrankie wat hy op Slughorn se lessenaar gaan haal het vies. Hy gooi die skelpienk mengsel in sy ketel en

steek 'n vuurtjie daaronder aan. Hy het nie die vaagste benul wat hy volgende moet doen nie. Hy loer vir Ron, wat soos 'n idioot daar staan noudat hy alles wat Harry gedoen het, klaar nageaap het.

“Is jy seker die Prins het nie enige wenke nie?” brom Ron vir Harry.

Harry trek sy staatmaker-eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* nader en blaai na die hoofstuk oor Teenmiddels. Daar staan Golpalott se Derde Wet, woord vir woord soos wat Hermione dit afgerammel het, maar hy sien nie 'n enkele insiggewende nota in die Prins se handskrif wat verduidelik wat dit beteken nie. Die Prins het duidelik, net soos Hermione, nie gesukkel om dit te verstaan nie.

“Nee,” sê Harry bedruk.

Hermione swaai haar towerstaf nou entoesiasies oor haar ketel. Ongelukkig kan hulle haar towerspreuk nie na-aap nie, want sy is nou al so goed met nieverbale inkantasies dat sy die woorde nie hardop hoef te sê nie. Maar Ernie Macmillan mompel: “*Specialis revelio!*” bokant sy ketel en dit klink indrukwekkend, dus doen Harry en Ron haastig dieselfde.

Dit neem Harry net vyf minute om te besef sy reputasie as die beste towerdrankiemaker in die klas is besig om voor sy oë in duie te stort. Met sy eerste rondte deur die kelder loer Slughorn hoopvol in Harry se ketel, gereed om soos gewoonlik 'n genoeglike uitroep te gee, maar hy trek sy kop vinnig weg en hoes toe die reuk van vrot eiers hom oorweldig. Hermione se uitdrukking kan nie meer self-voldaan wees nie; sy het dit gehaat om in elke Towerdrankieklas uitgestof te word. Sy gooi nou haar gifdrankie se bestanddele, wat op 'n geheimsinnige manier geskei het, in tien verskillende kristalflessies. Meer om hierdie irriterende prentjie nie te sien nie as enigiets anders buk Harry af oor die Halfbloed Prins se boek en blaai onnodig hard verder daardeur.

En daar is dit: wild bo-oor 'n lang lys teenmiddels gekrap. *Druk net 'n besoarsteen in hul kele af.*

Harry staar vir 'n oomblik na die woorde. Het hy nie al eenkeer lank gelede van 'n besoarsteen gehoor nie? Het Snape dit nie in sy heel eerste Towerdrankieles genoem nie? “'n Steen geneem uit 'n bok se maag, wat jou teen die meeste gifsoorte sal beskerm.”

Dit is nie 'n antwoord op die Golpalottprobleem nie en as Snape nog steeds sy onderwyser was, sou Harry nie gewaag het om dit te doen nie, maar dit is nou tyd vir 'n wanhoopsdaad. Hy loop haastig na die stoorkas toe, krap daarin rond en stoot eenhoringhorings en bossies droë kruie eenkant tot hy heel agter 'n klein kartonboksie kry waarop die woord “Besoarstene” geskryf staan.

Hy maak die boks oop net toe Slughorn uitroep: “Twee minute oor, almal!” Binne-in is daar ’n halfdosyn verrimpelde bruin voorwerpe wat meer soos uitgedroogde niere as regte stene lyk. Harry gryp een, sit die boks terug in die kas en loop haastig terug na sy ketel.

“Tyd is ... VERSTREKE!” roep Slughorn goedig uit. “Wel, kom ons kyk hoe julle gevaar het! Blaise ... wat het jy daar vir my?”

Slughorn beweeg stadig deur die vertrek en bekijk die verskillende teenmiddels. Niemand het die taak voltooi nie, hoewel Hermione nog ’n paar ekstra bestanddele by haar bottel probeer inkry voor Slughorn by haar uitkom. Ron het heeltemal moed opgegee en doen net sy bes om nie die stink walms wat by sy ketel uitkom, in te asem nie. Harry staan en wag terwyl hy die besoarsteen in sy effens nat-geswete hand vashou.

Slughorn kom heel laaste by hul tafel. Hy snuif aan Ernie se drankie en beweeg grynsend na Ron s’n toe. Hy talm nie lank by Ron se ketel nie, maar retireer vinnig terwyl dit half klink of hy opgooigeluide maak. “En jy, Harry?” vra hy. “Wat het jy om vir my te wys?”

Harry hou sy hand uit. Die besoarsteen lê op sy palm.

Slughorn kyk ’n volle tien sekondes daarna. Harry wonder vir ’n oomblik of hy op hom gaan skree. Dan gooi hy sy kop agteroor en brul van die lag.

“Jou parmant!” basuin hy dit uit en vat die besoarsteen en hou dit in die lug sodat die klas dit kan sien. “O, jy’s nes jou ma ... Wel, ek kan nie met jou fout vind nie ... ’n Besoarsteen sal beslis as teenmiddel vir al hierdie gifstowwe dien!”

Hermione het roet op haar neus, haar gesig is natgesweet en sy is bleek van woede. Haar halfklaar teenmiddel wat twee-en-vyftig bestanddele asook ’n taamlike bos van haar hare bevat, prut lui agter Slughorn wat vir niemand anders as Harry oë het nie.

“En jy het op jou eie aan ’n besoarsteen gedink, hê, Harry?” vra sy deur knersende tande.

“Dis die individualistiese gees wat ’n ware towerdrankiemaker nodig het!” sê Slughorn verheug voor Harry kan antwoord. “Nes sy ma! Sy het oor dieselfde intuitiewe begrip vir towerdrankies beskik. Hy het dit ongetwyfeld by Lily geërf ... Ja, Harry, ja; as jy ’n besoarsteen byderhand het, sal dit natuurlik die ding doen ... Maar ’n besoarsteen werk nie vir alles nie en dis ’n taamlik rare steen, dus is dit steeds die moeite werd om te weet hoe om teenmiddels te meng ...”

Die enigste persoon in die vertrek wat kwater as Hermione lyk, is Malfoy, wat tot Harry se groot genot iets wat soos ’n kat se

opgooisels lyk oor homself uitgemors het. Maar voor een van hulle hul woede kan lug oor Harry almal in die klas kon oortref sonder om enige werk te doen, lui die klok.

“Tyd om op te pak!” sê Slughorn. “En tien ekstra punte vir Gryffindor vir louter vermetelheid!” Hy lag nog steeds stilletjies toe hy na sy lessenaar voor in die kelder terugwaggel.

Harry draai aspris en neem ’n ewigheid om sy sak te pak en toe te maak. Nie Ron óf Hermione wens hom geluk toe hulle uitgaan nie; hulle lyk al twee lelik omgekrap. Uiteindelik bly net Harry en Slughorn in die vertrek oor.

“Roer jou, Harry; jy gaan laat wees vir jou volgende klas,” sê Slughorn vriendelik en maak die goue knippe op sy draakvel-aktetas toe.

“Professor,” sê Harry en kan nie help om aan Voldemort te dink nie, “daar’s iets wat ek u graag wil vra.”

“Nou vra gerus, my liewe seun, vra gerus ...”

“Ek het gewonder wat weet professor van ... van Horcruxe?”

Slughorn verstar. Dit lyk of sy ronde gesig in homself insink. Hy lek sy lippe en vra dan skor: “Wat het jy gesê?”

“Ek het gevra of u enigiets van Horcruxe af weet, professor. Sien u –”

“Dumbledore het jou aangesê om dit te doen,” fluister Slughorn.

Sy stem het heeltemal verander. Dit is glad nie meer gemoedelik nie, maar geskok en angsbevange. Hy vroetel in sy bosak rond, haal ’n sakdoek uit en vee sy nat voorkop af.

“Dumbledore het dit vir jou gewys – daai herinnering,” sê Slughorn. “Wel? Het hy?”

“Ja,” sê Harry, wat besluit dit sal beter wees om nie te jok nie.

“Ja, natuurlik,” sê Slughorn sag terwyl hy sy wit gesig nog steeds afvee. “Natuurlik ... Wel, as jy daardie herinnering gesien het, Harry, sal jy weet ek weet niks – niks –” herhaal hy die woord met nadruk “– van Horcruxe af nie.”

Hy gryp sy draakvel-aktetas, stop sy sakdoek terug in sy sak en marsjeer na die kelderdeur.

“Professor,” sê Harry desperaat, “ek het net gedink daar steek dalk ’n bietjie meer in die herinnering –”

“Het jy?” sê Slughorn. “Wel, dan was jy verkeerd. VERKEERD!”

Hy bulder die laaste woord uit en voor Harry nog iets kan sê, klap hy die kelderdeur agter hom toe.

Ron en Hermione is ewe onsimpatiek toe Harry hulle van hierdie ramspoedige gesprek vertel. Hermione is nog steeds siedend oor die manier waarop Harry getriomfeer het sonder om

die werk ordentlik te doen. Ron is vies dat Harry nie vir hom ook 'n besoarsteen gegee het nie.

“Maar dit sou simpel gelyk het as ons dit al twee gedoen het!” sê Harry geïrriteerd. “Luister, ek moes hom probeer sagmaak sodat ek hom oor Voldemort kon uitvra, onthou. Komaan, ruk jou *reg*!” voeg hy vererg by, want Ron het teruggedeins toe hy die naam hoor.

Woedend oor hy misluk het en oor Ron en Hermione se houding, tob Harry die volgende paar dae oor wat om volgende omtrent Slughorn te doen. Hy besluit om Slughorn voorlopig te laat dink dat hy heeltemal van die Horcruxe vergeet het; dit voel vir Harry na die beste manier om hom 'n valse gevoel van veiligheid te gee voor hy weer tot die aanval oorgaan.

Toe Harry Slughorn nie weer uitvra nie, begin die Towerdrankie-meester hom weer so minsaam soos altyd behandel en dit lyk of hy nie meer aan die voorval dink nie. Harry wag vir 'n uitnodiging na een van sy aandpartytjies en is vasberade om dit hierdie keer te aanvaar, selfs al moet hy 'n Kwiddiekoefening herskeduleer. Maar hy kry ongelukkig nie so 'n uitnodiging nie. Harry vind by Hermione en Ginny uit, maar hulle het ook nie 'n uitnodiging gekry nie en sover hulle weet, ook niemand anders nie. Harry begin dink Slughorn is dalk glad nie so vergeetagtig soos wat hy lyk nie; miskien het hy besluit om Harry eenvoudig nie weer kans te gee om hom te ondervra nie.

Intussen laat Hogwarts se biblioteek Hermione vir die eerste keer in menseheugenis in die steek. Sy is so geskok dat sy skoon vergeet sy is nog vies vir Harry ná sy slenter met die besoarsteen.

“Ek kon nie 'n enkele verduideliking kry van wat 'n Horcrux doen nie!” sê sy vir hom. “Nie een enkele een nie! Ek is dwarsdeur die beperkte afdeling en selfs in die *horribaalste* boeke waarin hulle vir jou sê hoe om die *afgrypslikste* drankies te brou, is daar niks nie! Al wat ek kon kry, is dit, in die inleiding tot *Allerboosste Towergruwels* – luister – ‘oor die Horcrux, die boosste van alle magiese uitvindings, sal ons nóg praat nóg aanwysings gee’ ... Maar hoekom dit dan noem?” sê sy ongeduldig en klap die ou boek só hard toe dat hy spookagtig weeklaag. “Ag, bly stil,” snou sy hom toe en stop die boek terug in haar sak.

Teen die begin van Februarie smelt die sneeu om die skool en dit is nou net koud en triestig en nat. Persgrys wolke hang laag oor die kasteel en die aanhoudende ysreën maak die grasperke glad en modderig. Een voordeel hiervan is dat die sesdejaars se eerste Appareringsles, wat vir 'n Saterdagoggend geskeduleer is sodat hulle nie hul gewone klasse hoef mis te loop nie, in die Groot Saal pleks van buite op die skoolgrond plaasvind.

Harry en Hermione daag in die Saal op (Ron is al klaar daar saam met Lavender) en sien al die tafels het verdwyn. Die reën slaan hard teen die hoë vensters en die betowerde plafon maal donker bokant hulle toe hulle bymekaarkom voor professors McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick en Sprout – die Huishoofde – en ’n klein towenaartjie wat Harry aanneem die Ministerie se Appareringsinstrukteur is. Hy is vreemd kleurloos, met deurskynende ooghare en yl hare, en hy lyk só broos dat ’n ligte windvlagie hom maklik sal kan wegwaai. Harry wonder of die aanhoudende verdwynings en herverskynings hom op ’n manier minder solied gemaak het en of sy tengerige bou ideaal is vir iemand wat in die niet wil verdwyn.

“Goeiemôre,” sê die Ministerie se towenaar toe al die studente daar is en die Huishoofde hulle stilgemaak het. “My naam is Wilkie Twycross en ek gaan vir die volgende twaalf weke julle Appareringsinstrukteur wees. Ek hoop om julle in hierdie tyd vir julle Appareringstoets voor te berei –”

“Malfoy, bly stil en gee aandag!” blaf professor McGonagall.

Almal kyk om. Malfoy bloos ’n dowwe pienk; hy staan woedend weg van Crabbe met wie hy blykbaar fluisterend geargumenteer het. Harry kyk vinnig na Snape wat ook vies lyk, hoewel Harry sterk vermoed dit is nie oor Malfoy se swak gedrag nie, maar oor die feit dat professor McGonagall iemand van sy huis betig het.

“– en dat baie van julle daarná gereed sal wees om die toets af te lê,” gaan Twycross aan asof daar nie ’n onderbreking was nie.

“Soos julle dalk weet, is dit gewoonlik onmoontlik om hier in Hogwarts te Appareer of te Disappareer. Die Skoolhoof het hierdie beperking opgehef, slegs hier in die Groot Saal en slegs vir een uur, sodat julle kan oefen. Ek wil net beklemtoon – julle sal nie in staat wees om buite die mure van hierdie Saal te Appareer nie, en dit sal ook onwys wees om dit te probeer doen.

“Ek wil hê elkeen van julle moet nou ’n posisie inneem waar jy ’n ruimte van vyf voet voor jou oop het.”

Daar is ’n groot geskarrel en gestoei soos wat almal uitmekaar spat, in mekaar vashardloop en ander uit hul ruimte wegboender. Die Huishoofde beweeg tussen die studente deur, jaag dié wat stry uitmekaar en rangskik hulle in posisie.

“Harry, waarheen gaan jy?” wil Hermione weet.

Maar Harry antwoord nie; hy beweeg vinnig deur die groep, verby professor Flitwick wat ’n paar Raweklouers wat almal so ver voor as moontlik wil staan, piepend in posisie probeer kry, verby professor Sprout wat die Hoesenproesers laat rondskarrel, tot hy verby Ernie Macmillan glip en agter almal staan, reg agter Malfoy

wat die algemene deurmekaarspul benut om sy argument met Crabbe wat vyf voet verder staan en opstandig lyk, voort te sit.

“Ek weet nie hoe lank dit nog gaan vat nie, oukei?” sis Malfoy vir hom, onbewus van Harry wat reg agter hom staan. “Dit vat langer as wat ek gedink het dit sou.”

Crabbe maak sy mond oop, maar dit lyk of Malfoy klaar geraai het wat hy gaan sê.

“Hoor hier, dit traak julle nie wat ek doen nie, Crabbe; jy en Goyle moet net maak soos ek sê en wag staan!”

“Ek sê vir my vriende wat ek beplan as ek wil hê hulle moet wag staan,” sê Harry net hard genoeg sodat Malfoy hom kan hoor.

Malfoy swaai om en sy hand vlieg na sy towerstaf, maar op daardie oomblik skree die vier Huishoofde: “Stilte!” en dit word doodstil. Malfoy draai stadig terug vorentoe.

“Dankie,” sê Twycross. “Nou goed ...”

Hy swaai sy towerstaf. Outydse houthoepels verskyn oombliklik op die vloer voor elke student.

“Die belangrike dinge om te onthou wanneer jy Appareer, is die drie D’s!” sê Twycross. “Destinasie, Determinasie, Deliberasie!”

“Stap een: fokus op ’n verlangde *destinasie*,” sê Twycross. “In hierdie geval, binne-in jou hoepel. Konsentreer asseblief nou op daardie *destinasie*.”

Almal kyk onderlangs rond om seker te maak al die ander staar na hul hoepels, en maak dan haastig soos wat hulle aangesê is om te doen. Harry staar na die stowwerige sirkel wat sy hoepel op die vloer vorm en probeer hard om aan niks anders te dink nie. Maar dit is onmoontlik, want hy kan nie ophou wonder wat Malfoy doen dat hy mense nodig het wat vir hom wag staan nie.

“Stap twee,” sê Twycross, “fokus op jou *determinasie* om die gevisualiseerde ruimte te betree. Laat jou vasberadenheid om dit te betree van jou brein na elke deeltjie van jou liggaam vloei!”

Harry loer skelm rond. ’n Entjie links van hom konsentreer Ernie Macmillan so hard op sy hoepel dat sy gesig pienk word; dit lyk of hy sukkel om ’n eier so groot soos ’n Swelger te lê. Harry sluk sy lag en kyk weer vir sy eie hoepel.

“Stap drie,” kondig Twycross aan, “en slegs wanneer ek die bevel gee ... draai om en om daar waar jy staan, voel hoe jy die niet ingaan en beweeg met *deliberasie*! Op my bevel, nou ... een –”

Harry kyk weer rond; baie mense lyk nogal verskrik dat daar van hulle verwag word om sommerso vinnig te Appareer.

“– twee –”

Harry probeer sy gedagtes weer op sy hoepel toespits; hy het al klaar vergeet waarvoor die drie D's staan.

“– DRIE!”

Harry begin in die rondte draai, verloor sy balans en val amper om. Hy is nie die enigste een nie. Die hele Saal is skielik vol steierende mense; Neville lê plat op sy rug; Ernie Macmillan daarenteen, het 'n soort pirouettesprongetjie tot in sy hoepel gemaak en lyk vir 'n oomblik opgewonde tot hy sien Dean Thomas lag hom slap vir hom.

“Toemaar, toemaar,” sê Twycross droogweg asof hy niks beters verwag het nie. “Kry julle hoepels reg en neem asseblief weer julle oorspronklike posisies in ...”

Die tweede poging verloop niks beter as die eerste een nie. Die derde een is ook 'n mislukking. Maar die vierde keer gebeur daar iets opwindends. Daar is 'n aaklige pynkreet en almal kyk angstig om en sien Susan Bones van Hoesenproes staan onvas in haar hoepel sonder haar linkerbeen wat vyf voet verder, waar sy begin het, agtergebly het.

Die Huishoofde drom om haar saam; daar is 'n harde slag en 'n pers rookwolk en dan staan Susan snikkend daar, herenig met haar been, maar vervul met afgryse.

“Versplintering, of die skeiding van lukrake liggaamsdele,” sê Twycross ongeërg, “vind plaas wanneer die brein se *determinasie* onvoldoende is. Jy moet voortdurend op jou *destinasie* konsentreer en sonder haas beweeg, maar met *deliberasie* ... só.”

Twycross gee 'n tree vorentoe, draai grasieus op een plek met sy arms uitgestrek en verdwyn met 'n wappering van kleedpante en herverskyn agter in die Saal.

“Onthou die drie D's,” sê hy, “en probeer weer ... een – twee – drie –”

Maar 'n uur later is Susan se Versplintering nog steeds die interessantste ding wat gebeur het. Twycross lyk egter nie ontmoedig nie. Hy maak sy mantel by sy nek vas en sê bloot: “Tot volgende Saterdag, almal, en moenie vergeet nie: *Destinasie. Determinasie. Deliberasie.*”

En daarmee swaai hy sy towerstaf, laat die hoepels Verdwyn en loop saam met professor McGonagall by die Saal uit. Almal begin dadelik babbel en beweeg uit na die Ingangsportaal.

“Hoe't jy gevaar?” vra Ron toe hy Harry inhaal. “Ek dink ek het die laaste keer iets gevoel – 'n soort tinteling in my voete.”

“Dis oor jou tekkies te klein is, Won-Won,” sê 'n stem agter hulle en Hermione loop smalend verby.

“Ek het niks gevoel nie,” sê Harry en ignoreer hierdie onderbreking. “Maar dit pla my nie nie –”

“Wat bedoel jy, dit pla jou nie ... Wil jy nie leer Appareer nie?” vra Ron ongelowig.

“Ek gee nie eintlik om nie. Ek wil eerder leer vlieg,” sê Harry en kyk oor sy skouer om te sien waar Malfoy is. Toe hulle in die Ingangsportaal is, loop Harry vinniger en sê: “Komaan, maak gou, daar’s iets wat ek wil doen ...”

’n Verwarde Ron sit Harry op ’n drafstap agterna Gryffindortoring toe. Hulle word voorgekeer deur Peeves wat ’n deur op die vierde verdieping toedruk en weier om enigiemand deur te laat voor hy nie sy eie broek aan die brand steek nie, maar Harry en Ron draai eenvoudig om en volg een van hul betroubare kortpaaie. Binne vyf minute klim hulle deur die portretopening.

“Gaan jy my nou sê wat jy wil doen?” vra Ron taamlik uitasem.

“Komaan,” sê Harry en loop vooruit deur die geselskamer na die seuns se trap toe.

Hulle slaapsaal is leeg, soos wat Harry gehoop het. Hy maak sy trommel oop en begin daarin rondkrap terwyl Ron hom ongeduldig dophou.

“Harry ...”

“Malfoy gebruik Crabbe en Goyle om vir hom wag te staan. Hy’t netnou met Crabbe geargumenteer. Ek wil weet ... Aha!”

Hy het dit gekry: ’n opgevoude vierkantige stuk perkament wat heeltemal leeg lyk. Harry vou dit oop en tik met sy towerstaf se punt daarop.

“*Ek sweer plegtig ... dat ek niks goeds beoog nie* of dis in ieder geval wat Malfoy doen.” Die Plunderaar se Kaart verskyn dadelik op die perkament se oppervlak. Dit gee ’n volledige uiteensetting van elkeen van die kasteel se verdiepings en die bewegende klein swart spikkels met die etikette wys waar elkeen van die kasteel se bewoners hom of haar bevind.

“Help my om Malfoy te kry,” sê Harry dringend.

Hy sit die kaart op sy bed neer en hy en Ron leun daaroor en begin soek.

“Daar’s hy!” sê Ron ná ’n minuut of wat. “Hy’s in Slytherin se geselskamer, kyk ... saam met Parkinson en Zabini en Crabbe en Goyle ...”

Harry kyk teleurgesteld na die kaart, maar weier om moed te verloor.

“Ek gaan hom van nou af fyn dophou,” sê hy vasbeslote. “En die oomblik dat ek sien hy sluip iewers rond met Crabbe en Goyle wat

buite wag staan, trek ek my Onsigbaarheidsmantel aan en gaan vind uit wat hy –”

Hy onderbreek homself toe Neville by die slaapsaal inkom. Neville ruik na geskroeiende materiaal en begin in sy trommel rondkrap op soek na 'n skoon broek.

Harry is vasberade om Malfoy uit te vang, maar hy vorder nie gedurende die volgende paar weke nie. Hoewel hy die kaart so dikwels moontlik raadpleeg (en soms onnodig tussen klasse badkamer toe gaan om daarop te kyk), sien hy Malfoy nie by enige verdagte plekke ingaan nie. Toegegee, hy sien Crabbe en Goyle meer as gewoonlik op hul eie deur die kasteel beweeg en partykeer in verlate gange stilstaan, maar dan is Malfoy nie êrens naby hulle nie; Harry kan hom nêrens op die kaart opspoor nie. Dit is baie vreemd. Harry oorweeg die moontlikheid dat Malfoy die skoolgrond verlaat, maar kan nie sien hoe hy dit sal regkry nie, aangesien die kasteel se veiligheidsmaatreëls so verskerp is. Hy kan net aanneem dat hy Malfoy mis kyk tussen al die honderde klein swart kolletjies op die kaart. En wat betref die feit dat Malfoy, Crabbe en Goyle oënskynlik al hoe meer hul eie rigting inslaan terwyl hulle gewoonlik onafskeidbaar is; sulke dinge gebeur wanneer mense ouer word – Ron en Hermione, dink Harry hartseer, is 'n sprekende bewys daarvan.

Februarie word Maart met geen verandering in die weer nie, behalwe dat dit afgesien van die nat weer nou boonop winderig ook word. Tot almal se ontsteltenis verskyn daar 'n aankondiging op al die geselskamers se kennisgewingborde dat die volgende uitstappie Hogsmeade toe gekanselleer is. Ron is woedend.

“Dit was op my verjaardag!” sê hy. “Ek het só daarna uitgesien!”

“Dis nie so 'n groot verrassing nie, is dit?” sê Harry. “Nie ná wat met Katie gebeur het nie.”

Sy is nog steeds nie terug van Sint Mungo af nie. Wat meer is, volgens die *Daaglikse Profeet* het daar nóg mense verdwyn, insluitende etlike familieleden van Hogwarts se studente.

“Nou is al waarna ek kan uitsien 'n simpel Appareringsles!” vaar Ron vies uit. “Wat 'n lekker verjaardag ...”

Drie Appareringslesse later sukkel almal nog net so baie, al het nog 'n paar mense dit al reggekry om hulself te Versplinter. Almal is erg gefrustreerd en suur vir Wilkie Twycross en sy drie D's, wat al gelei het tot 'n paar byname vir hom, waarvan die ordentlikstes Dikkop en Donkiebol is.

“Geluk met jou verjaardag, Ron,” sê Harry op die eerste Maart toe Seamus en Dean wat af ontbyt toe gaan hulle wakker raas. “Hier's jou present.”

Hy gooi die pakkie oor na Ron se bed waar dit tussen 'n hopie ander beland wat Harry aanneem gedurende die nag deur huiselwe afgelewer is.

"Dankie," sê Ron deur die slaap en terwyl hy die papier afskeur, klim Harry uit die bed, maak sy trommel oop en krap daarin rond op soek na die Plunderaar se Kaart wat hy elke keer versigtig wegsteek. Hy gooi die helfte van sy trommel se inhoud uit voor hy dit uiteindelik onder die opgerolde sokkies kry waar hy nog steeds sy botteltjie met die geluksdrankie Felix Felicis wegsteek.

"Reg," sê hy terwyl hy die kaart saam met hom bed toe vat en liggies daarop tik en mompel: "Ek sweer plegtig dat ek niks goeds beoog nie" sodat Neville wat by sy bed se voetenent verbyloop dit nie moet hoor nie.

"Lekker present, Harry!" sê Ron entoesiasties en waai die nuwe paar Kwiddiek-Wagterhandskoene wat Harry vir hom gegee het in die lug.

"G'n probleem nie," sê Harry ingedagte terwyl hy Slytherin se slaapsaal deeglik deursoek. "Hei ... Ek dink nie Malfoy is in sy bed nie ..."

Ron antwoord nie; hy is te besig om presente oop te maak; elke nou en dan gil hy van blydschap.

"Moewiese goeie oes vanjaar!" kondig hy aan en hou 'n swaar goue horlosie met vreemde simbole om die rand en klein, bewegende sterretjies pleks van wysers omhoog. "Kyk wat het Ma en Pa vir my gegee! Jislaaik, ek is sommer lus en word volgende jaar weer mondig ..."

"Cool," brom Harry en loer vinnig na die horlosie voor hy die kaart weer van nader bestudeer. Waar is Malfoy? Hy eet nie ontbyt by Slytherin se tafel in die Groot Saal nie ... Hy is nêrens naby Snape wat in sy kantoor sit nie ... Hy is nie in enige van die badkamers of in die siekeboeg nie ...

"Een vir jou?" vra Ron en hou 'n boks Sjokoketels na Harry toe uit.

"Nee dankie," sê Harry en kyk op. "Malfoy is al weer weg!"

"Kan nie wees nie," sê Ron en stop 'n tweede sjokolade in sy mond terwyl hy van die bed af gly om aan te trek. "Komaan, as jy nie gou maak nie, gaan jy op 'n leë maag moet Appareer ... wat dit dalk makliker sal maak ..."

Ron kyk ingedagte na die boks Sjokoketels, haal dan sy skouers op en vat vir hom 'n derde een.

Harry tik met sy towerstaf op die kaart en mompel: "Onheil is beheer" al is dit nie die geval nie, en trek aan terwyl hy diep dink.

Daar moet 'n verduideliking vir Malfoy se sporadiese verdwynings wees, maar hy kan eenvoudig nie dink wat dit kan wees nie. Die beste manier om uit te vind, sal wees om hom te agtervolg, maar selfs met die Onsigbaarheidsmantel is dit onprakties; hy moet klasse bywoon, Kwiddiek oefen, huiswerk doen en vir Appareringslesse gaan; hy kan Malfoy nie heeldag oral in die skool agtervolg sonder dat iemand sal agterkom hy is weg nie.

“Gereed?” vra hy vir Ron.

Hy is al halfpad na die slaapsaal se deur toe hy besef Ron beweeg nie, maar leun net teen sy bed en staar by die natgereënde venster uit met 'n vreemde, ongefokusde uitdrukking op sy gesig.

“Ron. Ontbyt.”

“Ek is nie honger nie.”

Harry staar hom aan.

“Ek dog jy't nou net gesê – ?”

“Oukei, ek sal saam met jou afgaan,” sug Ron, “maar ek wil nie eet nie.”

Harry kyk hom agterdogtig aan.

“Jy't nou net 'n halwe boks Sjokoketels opgeëet, nie waar nie?”

“Dis nie dit nie,” sug Ron weer. “Jy ... jy sal nie verstaan nie.”

“As jy so sê,” sê Harry wat nie mooi verstaan nie en hy draai deur toe.

“Harry!” sê Ron skielik.

“Wat?”

“Harry, ek kan dit nie vat nie!”

“Wat kan jy nie vat nie?” vra Harry en begin nou definitief bekommerd raak. Ron lyk nogal bleek, asof hy enige oomblik gaan naar word.

“Ek kan nie ophou om aan haar te dink nie!” sê Ron skor.

Harry gaap hom aan. Hy was dit nie te wagte nie en hy is nie so seker hy wil dit hoor nie. Hulle is miskien vriende, maar as Ron Lavender “Lav-Lav” gaan begin noem, sal hy sy voet moet neersit.

“Hoekom stop dit jou om ontbyt te wil eet?” vra Harry wat probeer om 'n tikkie gesonde verstand by die gesprek in te werk.

“Ek dink nie sy weet ek bestaan nie,” sê Ron met 'n desperate gebaar.

“Sy weet definitief jy bestaan,” sê Harry verbysterd. “Sy vry dan heeltyd met jou.”

Ron knip sy oë.

“Van wie praat jy?”

“Van wie praat jy?” vra Harry wat al hoe meer begin voel dat hierdie gesprek glad nie sin maak nie.

“Romilda Vane,” sê Ron sag en sy hele gesig helder op toe hy dit sê, asof ’n straatjie van die suiwerste sonlig dit aangeraak het.

Hulle staar amper ’n hele minuut lank na mekaar voor Harry sê: “Dis ’n grap, nè? Jy maak ’n grap.”

“Ek dink ... Harry, ek dink ek het haar lief,” sê Ron in ’n gesmoorde stem.

“Oukei,” sê Harry en loop tot by Ron om sy wasige oë en bleek gesig beter te kan sien. “Oukei ... sê dit weer sonder om te lag.”

“Ek het haar lief,” herhaal Ron uitasem. “Het jy al haar hare gesien; dis so swart en blink en sag soos sy ... en haar oë? Haar groot, donker oë? En haar –”

“Dis regtig baie snaaks en als,” sê Harry ongeduldig, “maar dis nou genoeg van dié grap, oukei? Los dit nou.”

Hy draai om en loop deur toe, maar hy vorder net twee tree voor ’n harde hou hom op die regteroor tref. Harry steier en kyk om. Ron se vuus is gebal en sy gesig is vertrek van woede; hy is gereed om weer te slaan.

Harry reageer instinktief; hy pluk sy towerstaf uit sy sak en dink onwillekeurig aan die inkantasie: *Levicorpus!*

Ron gil terwyl hy weer aan die hakskeen opgehys word; hy swaai hulpeloos onderstebo rond en sy kleed hang oor hom ondertoe.

“Waarvoor was dit?” brul Harry

“Jy’t haar beledig, Harry! Jy’t gesê dis ’n grap!” skree Ron, wat stadig-aan pers in die gesig word soos wat al die bloed na sy kop toe loop.

“Dis malligheid!” sê Harry. “Wat het in jou gevaar?”

En toe sien hy die boks wat ooplê op Ron se bed en die waarheid tref hom met die geweld van ’n stormende trol tussen die oë.

“Waar het jy daai Sjokoketels gekry?”

“Dis een van my verjaardagpresente!” roep Ron, wat stadig in die lug in die rondte draai terwyl hy probeer loskom. “Ek het nog vir jou een aangebied, onthou jy?”

“Jy’t die goed van die vloer af opgetel, nè?”

“Ja, dit het van my bed afgeval. Kry my nou hier af!”

“Dit het nie van jou bed afgeval nie, jou aapstert! Verstaan jy nie? Dit was myne. Ek het dit uit die trommel gehaal toe ek die kaart gesoek het. Dis Sjokoketels wat Romilda voor Kersfees vir my gegee het en dis met ’n liefdesdrankie gedokter!”

Maar dit lyk of net een woord hiervan by Ron geregistreer het.

“Romilda?” herhaal hy. “Het jy gesê Romilda? Harry – ken jy haar? Kan jy my aan haar voorstel?”

Harry staar na die hangende Ron wie se gesig nou ontsaglik hoopvol lyk en onderdruk ’n amper onweersaanbare begeerte om

te lag. 'n Deel van hom – die deel naaste aan sy kloppende regteroor – hou nogal van die idee om Ron los te laat en te kyk hoe hy amok maak tot die liefdesdrankie se effek uitgewerk is ... maar aan die ander kant is hulle veronderstel om vriende te wees en was Ron nie homself toe hy hom aangeval het nie. Harry besluit hy sal nog 'n vuishou verdien as hy Ron toelaat om sy ewige liefde aan Romilda Vane te verklaar.”

“Ja, ek sal jou voorstel,” sê Harry en dink vinnig. “Ek gaan jou nou laat afkom, oukei?”

Hy laat val Ron met 'n harde slag op die grond (sy oor is eintlik nogal baie seer), maar Ron kom dadelik weer op die been en grinnik.

“Sy sal in Slughorn se kantoor wees,” sê Harry selfversekerd en loop eerste by die deur uit.

“Hoekom sal sy daar wees?” vra Ron bekommerd en moet uithaal om by te hou.

“O, sy doen ekstra Towerdrankieklasse by hom,” suig Harry wild iets uit sy duim.

“Miskien kan ek vra of ek dit saam met haar kan doen!” sê Ron gretig.

“Goeie idee,” sê Harry.

Lavender wag langs die portretopening, 'n verwikkeling wat Harry nie te wagte was nie.

“Jy's laat, Won-Won!” pruil sy. “Ek het vir jou 'n verjaardag– ”

“Los my uit,” sê Ron ongeduldig. “Harry gaan my aan Romilda Vane voorstel.”

En sonder 'n verdere woord aan haar klim hy deur die portretopening. Harry probeer vir Lavender 'n verskonende gesig trek, maar dit registreer dalk eenvoudig net as geamuseerd, want sy lyk meer gekrenk as ooit toe die Vet Vrou agter hulle toeswaaï.

Harry is half bekommerd dat Slughorn dalk by ontbyt is, maar die professor maak sy kantoordeur ná die eerste klop oop. Slughorn dra 'n groen fluweeljapon met 'n bypassende slaapmus en sy oë lyk papperig.

“Harry,” mompel hy. “Dis baie vroeg vir besoekers ... Ek slaap gewoonlik Saterdag laat ...”

“Professor, ek is vreeslik jammer om u te pla,” sê Harry so sag moontlik terwyl Ron op die punte van sy tone staan om verby Slughorn by sy kantoor in te loer, “maar my vriend Ron het per ongeluk 'n liefdesdrankie ingekry. Kan u nie dalk vir hom 'n teenmiddel maak nie? Ek wil hom nie na Madame Pomfrey toe vat nie, want ons is nie veronderstel om enigiets wat van Weasleys se Wonderpoetse af kom, by ons te hê nie ... Ek is bang vir ongemaklike vrae ...”

“Ek sou dink ’n meesterlike towerdrankiemaker soos jy sou vinnig vir hom ’n teenmiddel aanmekaar kon slaan,” sê Slughorn.

“E,” sê Harry effens van stryk af gebring deur Ron wat hom nou in die ribbes pomp in ’n poging om met geweld by die vertrek in te kom, “wel, ek het nog nooit ’n teenmiddel vir ’n liefdesdrankie gemeng nie, professor, en teen die tyd dat ek dit regkry, het Ron dalk al iets ernstigs aangevang –”

Ron help hom onwetend deur juis op hierdie oomblik te kreun: “Ek sien haar nie, Harry – steek hy haar weg?”

“Is hierdie drankie onlangs gemaak?” vra Slughorn wat Ron nou met professionele belangstelling bekyk. “Hulle kan sterker word, weet jy, hoe langer jy hulle hou.”

“Dit sal baie dinge verduidelik,” hyg Harry wat nou behoorlik met Ron moet stoei om te keer dat hy Slughorn omstoot. “Dis sy verjaardag, professor,” voeg hy pleitend by.

“O, goed, kom dan maar in, kom in,” gee Slughorn kop. “Ek het al die nodige hier in my sak; dis nie ’n moeilike teenmiddel nie ...”

Ron bars by Slughorn se oorverhitte, oorvol studeerkamer in, struikel oor ’n voetstoel met tassels, herwin sy ewewig deur Harry om die nek te gryp en prewel: “Sy’t dit nie gesien nie, het sy?”

“Sy’s nog nie hier nie,” sê Harry en kyk hoe Slughorn sy towerdrankiesak oopmaak en ’n paar knippies hiervan en daarvan in ’n klein kristalbotteltjie gooi.

“Dis goed,” sê Ron hartstogtelik. “Hoe lyk ek?”

“Baie aantreklik,” sê Slughorn gladdemonde en gee vir Ron ’n glas met ’n deursigtige vloeistof in. “Toe, drink dit op; dis ’n tonikum vir die senuwees, om jou kalm te hou wanneer sy hier aankom, sien.”

“Briljant,” sê Ron gretig en sluk die teenmiddel slurpend af.

Harry en Slughorn hou hom dop. Vir ’n oomblik kyk Ron hulle stralend aan en dan, baie stadig, verstyf sy glimlag en verdwyn en maak plek vir ’n uitdrukking van verskriklike afgryse.

“Alles weer terug na normaal,” sê Harry en grinnik. Slughorn grinnik. “Baie dankie, professor.”

“Nie te danke nie, ou seun, nie te danke nie,” sê Slughorn terwyl Ron in ’n leunstoel neerval en totaal verpletter lyk. “’n Opkikker, dis wat hy nodig het,” gaan Slughorn aan en buk af oor ’n tafel wat vol drankies staan. “Ek het Botterbier, ek het wyn, ek het een laaste bottel van hierdie heuningbier wat in eikehout verouder is ... hmm ... Ek wou dit nog vir Dumbledore vir Kersfees gegee het ... Ag, nou ja ...” en hy haal sy skouers op, “... hy kan nie iets wat nooit syne was, mis nie! Hoekom maak ons dit nie nou oop en vier

meneer Weasley se verjaardag nie? Daar's niks soos 'n fynproewersdrankie om die pyn van 'n liefdesteleurstelling te verdryf nie ..."

Hy grinnik weer en Harry steek by hom aan. Dit is die eerste keer dat hy so te sê alleen by Slughorn is ná sy rampspoedige eerste poging om sy ware herinnering uit hom te trek. Miskien, as hy Slughorn net in so 'n goeie bui kan hou ... miskien, as hulle genoeg van die eikehoutverouderde heuningbier drink ...

"Daar's hy," sê Slughorn en gee vir Harry en Ron elkeen 'n glas heuningbier voordat hy sy glas ophig. "Nou ja, hartlik geluk met jou verjaardag, Ralph –"

"– Ron –" fluister Harry.

Maar dit lyk nie of Ron na die heildronk luister nie. Hy het die glas reeds in sy mond omgekeer en hy slaan die heuningbier met een sluk weg.

Daar is een sekonde, skaars meer as 'n hartklop, waarin Harry weet daar is iets verskrikliks verkeerd en Slughorn blykbaar nie.

"– en mag jy nog baie –"

"Ron!"

Ron het sy glas laat val; hy kom effens uit sy stoel op en verkrummel dan terwyl sy hande en voete onbeheerbaar begin saamtrek. Daar loop skuim by sy mond uit en sy oë peul uit hul kasse.

"Professor!" gil Harry. "Doen iets!"

Maar dit lyk of Slughorn verlam is van skok. Ron ruk en stik; sy vel word blou.

"Wat – maar –" stamel Slughorn.

Harry spring oor die lae tafel en hardloop tot by Slughorn se oop towerdrankietas; hy pluk woens flessies en sakkies daaruit terwyl die aaklige geluid van Ron se geroggel die vertrek vul. Dan kry hy dit – die verrimpelde, nieragtige steen wat Slughorn tydens Towerdrankies by hom gevat het.

Hy storm terug na Ron, dwing sy kake oop en druk die besoarsteen in sy mond. Ron se hele lyf sidder, hy snak hortend na asem en dan lê hy daar, slap en doodstil.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



ELF TAILS

So, all in all, not one of Ron's better birthdays?" said Fred.

It was evening; the hospital wing was quiet, the windows curtained, the lamps lit. Ron's was the only occupied bed. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny were sitting around him; they had spent all day waiting outside the double doors, trying to see inside whenever somebody went in or out. Madam Pomfrey had only let them enter at eight o'clock. Fred and George had arrived at ten past.

"This isn't how we imagined handing over our present," said George grimly, putting down a large wrapped gift on Ron's bedside cabinet and sitting beside Ginny.

"Yeah, when we pictured the scene, he was conscious," said Fred.

"There we were in Hogsmeade, waiting to surprise him —" said George.

"You were in Hogsmeade?" asked Ginny, looking up.

“We were thinking of buying Zonko’s,” said Fred gloomily. “A Hogsmeade branch, you know, but a fat lot of good it’ll do us if you lot aren’t allowed out at weekends to buy our stuff anymore. . . . But never mind that now.”

He drew up a chair beside Harry and looked at Ron’s pale face.

“How exactly did it happen, Harry?”

Harry retold the story he had already recounted, it felt like a hundred times to Dumbledore, to McGonagall, to Madam Pomfrey, to Hermione, and to Ginny.

“. . . and then I got the bezoar down his throat and his breathing eased up a bit, Slughorn ran for help, McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey turned up, and they brought Ron up here. They reckon he’ll be all right. Madam Pomfrey says he’ll have to stay here a week or so . . . keep taking essence of rue . . .”

“Blimey, it was lucky you thought of a bezoar,” said George in a low voice.

“Lucky there was one in the room,” said Harry, who kept turning cold at the thought of what would have happened if he had not been able to lay hands on the little stone.

Hermione gave an almost inaudible sniff. She had been exceptionally quiet all day. Having hurtled, white-faced, up to Harry outside the hospital wing and demanded to know what had happened, she had taken almost no part in Harry and Ginny’s obsessive discussion about how Ron had been poisoned, but merely stood beside them, clench-jawed and frightened-looking, until at last they had been allowed in to see him.

“Do Mum and Dad know?” Fred asked Ginny.

“They’ve already seen him, they arrived an hour ago — they’re in Dumbledore’s office now, but they’ll be back soon. . . .”

There was a pause while they all watched Ron mumble a little in his sleep.

“So the poison was in the drink?” said Fred quietly.

“Yes,” said Harry at once; he could think of nothing else and was glad for the opportunity to start discussing it again. “Slughorn poured it out —”

“Would he have been able to slip something into Ron’s glass without you seeing?”

“Probably,” said Harry, “but why would Slughorn want to poison Ron?”

“No idea,” said Fred, frowning. “You don’t think he could have mixed up the glasses by mistake? Meaning to get you?”

“Why would Slughorn want to poison Harry?” asked Ginny.

“I dunno,” said Fred, “but there must be loads of people who’d like to poison Harry, mustn’t there? ‘The Chosen One’ and all that?”

“So you think Slughorn’s a Death Eater?” said Ginny.

“Anything’s possible,” said Fred darkly.

“He could be under the Imperius Curse,” said George.

“Or he could be innocent,” said Ginny. “The poison could have been in the bottle, in which case it was probably meant for Slughorn himself.”

“Who’d want to kill Slughorn?”

“Dumbledore reckons Voldemort wanted Slughorn on his side,” said Harry. “Slughorn was in hiding for a year before he came to

Hogwarts. And . . .” He thought of the memory Dumbledore had not yet been able to extract from Slughorn. “And maybe Voldemort wants him out of the way, maybe he thinks he could be valuable to Dumbledore.”

“But you said Slughorn had been planning to give that bottle to Dumbledore for Christmas,” Ginny reminded him. “So the poisoner could just as easily have been after Dumbledore.”

“Then the poisoner didn’t know Slughorn very well,” said Hermione, speaking for the first time in hours and sounding as though she had a bad head cold. “Anyone who knew Slughorn would have known there was a good chance he’d keep something that tasty for himself.”

“Er-my-nee,” croaked Ron unexpectedly from between them.

They all fell silent, watching him anxiously, but after muttering incomprehensibly for a moment he merely started snoring.

The dormitory doors flew open, making them all jump: Hagrid came striding toward them, his hair rain-flecked, his bearskin coat flapping behind him, a crossbow in his hand, leaving a trail of muddy dolphin-sized footprints all over the floor.

“Bin in the forest all day!” he panted. “Aragog’s worse, I bin readin’ to him — didn’ get up ter dinner till jus’ now an’ then Professor Sprout told me abou’ Ron! How is he?”

“Not bad,” said Harry. “They say he’ll be okay.”

“No more than six visitors at a time!” said Madam Pomfrey, hurrying out of her office.

“Hagrid makes six,” George pointed out.

“Oh . . . yes . . .” said Madam Pomfrey, who seemed to have been

counting Hagrid as several people due to his vastness. To cover her confusion, she hurried off to clear up his muddy footprints with her wand.

“I don’ believe this,” said Hagrid hoarsely, shaking his great shaggy head as he stared down at Ron. “Jus’ don’ believe it . . . Look at him lyin’ there. . . . Who’d want ter hurt him, eh?”

“That’s just what we were discussing,” said Harry. “We don’t know.”

“Someone couldn’ have a grudge against the Gryffindor Quidditch team, could they?” said Hagrid anxiously. “Firs’ Katie, now Ron . . .”

“I can’t see anyone trying to bump off a Quidditch team,” said George.

“Wood might’ve done the Slytherins if he could’ve got away with it,” said Fred fairly.

“Well, I don’t think it’s Quidditch, but I think there’s a connection between the attacks,” said Hermione quietly.

“How d’you work that out?” asked Fred.

“Well, for one thing, they both ought to have been fatal and weren’t, although that was pure luck. And for another, neither the poison nor the necklace seems to have reached the person who was supposed to be killed. Of course,” she added broodingly, “that makes the person behind this even more dangerous in a way, because they don’t seem to care how many people they finish off before they actually reach their victim.”

Before anybody could respond to this ominous pronouncement, the dormitory doors opened again and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley hurried up the ward. They had done no more than satisfy themselves that Ron

would make a full recovery on their last visit to the ward; now Mrs. Weasley seized hold of Harry and hugged him very tightly. “Dumbledore’s told us how you saved him with the bezoar,” she sobbed. “Oh, Harry, what can we say? You saved Ginny . . . you saved Arthur . . . now you’ve saved Ron . . .”

“Don’t be . . . I didn’t . . .” muttered Harry awkwardly.

“Half our family does seem to owe you their lives, now I stop and think about it,” Mr. Weasley said in a constricted voice. “Well, all I can say is that it was a lucky day for the Weasleys when Ron decided to sit in your compartment on the Hogwarts Express, Harry.”

Harry could not think of any reply to this and was almost glad when Madam Pomfrey reminded them that there were only supposed to be six visitors around Ron’s bed; he and Hermione rose at once to leave and Hagrid decided to go with them, leaving Ron with his family.

“It’s terrible,” growled Hagrid into his beard, as the three of them walked back along the corridor to the marble staircase. “All this new security, an’ kids are still gettin’ hurt. . . . Dumbledore’s worried sick. . . . He don’t say much, but I can tell. . . .”

“Hasn’t he got any ideas, Hagrid?” asked Hermione desperately.

“I ’spect he’s got hundreds of ideas, brain like his,” said Hagrid. “But he doesn’t know who sent that necklace nor put poison in that wine, or they’d’ve bin caught, wouldn’t they? Wha’ worries me,” said Hagrid, lowering his voice and glancing over his shoulder (Harry, for good measure, checked the ceiling for Peeves), “is how long Hogwarts can stay open if kids are bein’ attacked. Chamber o’ Secrets all over again, isn’t it? There’ll be panic, more parents takin’

their kids outta school, an' nex' thing yeh know the board o' governors . . .”

Hagrid stopped talking as the ghost of a long-haired woman drifted serenely past, then resumed in a hoarse whisper, “. . . the board o' governors'll be talkin' about shuttin' us up fer good.”

“Surely not?” said Hermione, looking worried.

“Gotta see it from their point o' view,” said Hagrid heavily. “I mean, it's always bin a bit of a risk sendin' a kid ter Hogwarts, hasn' it? Yer expect accidents, don' yeh, with hundreds of underage wizards all locked up tergether, but attempted murder, tha's diff'rent. 'S'no wonder Dumbledore's angry with Sn —”

Hagrid stopped in his tracks, a familiar, guilty expression on what was visible of his face above his tangled black beard.

“What?” said Harry quickly. “Dumbledore's angry with Snape?”

“I never said tha',” said Hagrid, though his look of panic could not have been a bigger giveaway. “Look at the time, it's gettin' on fer midnight, I need ter —”

“Hagrid, why is Dumbledore angry with Snape?” Harry asked loudly.

“Shhhh!” said Hagrid, looking both nervous and angry. “Don' shout stuff like that, Harry, d'yeh wan' me ter lose me job? Mind, I don' suppose yeh'd care, would yeh, not now yeh've given up Care of Mag —”

“Don't try and make me feel guilty, it won't work!” said Harry forcefully. “What's Snape done?”

“I dunno, Harry, I shouldn'ta heard it at all! I — well, I was comin' outta the forest the other evenin' an' I overheard 'em talking

— well, arguin’. Didn’t like ter draw attention to meself, so I sorta skulked an’ tried not ter listen, but it was a — well, a heated discussion an’ it wasn’ easy ter block it out.”

“Well?” Harry urged him, as Hagrid shuffled his enormous feet uneasily.

“Well — I jus’ heard Snape sayin’ Dumbledore took too much fer granted an’ maybe he — Snape — didn’ wan’ ter do it anymore —”

“Do what?”

“I dunno, Harry, it sounded like Snape was feelin’ a bit overworked, tha’s all — anyway, Dumbledore told him flat out he’d agreed ter do it an’ that was all there was to it. Pretty firm with him. An’ then he said summat abou’ Snape makin’ investigations in his House, in Slytherin. Well, there’s nothin’ strange abou’ that!” Hagrid added hastily, as Harry and Hermione exchanged looks full of meaning. “All the Heads o’ Houses were asked ter look inter that necklace business —”

“Yeah, but Dumbledore’s not having rows with the rest of them, is he?” said Harry.

“Look,” Hagrid twisted his crossbow uncomfortably in his hands; there was a loud splintering sound and it snapped in two. “I know what yeh’re like abou’ Snape, Harry, an’ I don’ want yeh ter go readin’ more inter this than there is.”

“Look out,” said Hermione tersely.

They turned just in time to see the shadow of Argus Filch looming over the wall behind them before the man himself turned the corner, hunchbacked, his jowls aquiver.

“Oho!” he wheezed. “Out of bed so late, this’ll mean detention!”

“No it won’t, Filch,” said Hagrid shortly. “They’re with me, aren’t they?”

“And what difference does that make?” asked Filch obnoxiously.

“I’m a ruddy teacher, aren’t I, yeh sneakin’ Squib!” said Hagrid, firing up at once.

There was a nasty hissing noise as Filch swelled with fury; Mrs. Norris had arrived, unseen, and was twisting herself sinuously around Filch’s skinny ankles.

“Get goin’,” said Hagrid out of the corner of his mouth.

Harry did not need telling twice; he and Hermione both hurried off; Hagrid’s and Filch’s raised voices echoed behind them as they ran. They passed Peeves near the turning into Gryffindor Tower, but he was streaking happily toward the source of the yelling, cackling and calling,

*When there’s strife and when there’s trouble
Call on Peevsie, he’ll make double!*

The Fat Lady was snoozing and not pleased to be woken, but swung forward grumpily to allow them to clamber into the mercifully peaceful and empty common room. It did not seem that people knew about Ron yet; Harry was very relieved: He had been interrogated enough that day. Hermione bade him good night and set off for the girls’ dormitory. Harry, however, remained behind, taking a seat beside the fire and looking down into the dying embers.

So Dumbledore had argued with Snape. In spite of all he had told Harry, in spite of his insistence that he trusted Snape completely, he had lost his temper with him. . . . He did not think that Snape had

tried hard enough to investigate the Slytherins . . . or, perhaps, to investigate a single Slytherin: Malfoy?

Was it because Dumbledore did not want Harry to do anything foolish, to take matters into his own hands, that he had pretended there was nothing in Harry's suspicions? That seemed likely. It might even be that Dumbledore did not want anything to distract Harry from their lessons, or from procuring that memory from Slughorn. Perhaps Dumbledore did not think it right to confide suspicions about his staff to sixteen-year-olds. . . .

"There you are, Potter!"

Harry jumped to his feet in shock, his wand at the ready. He had been quite convinced that the common room was empty; he had not been at all prepared for a hulking figure to rise suddenly out of a distant chair. A closer look showed him that it was Cormac McLaggen.

"I've been waiting for you to come back," said McLaggen, disregarding Harry's drawn wand. "Must've fallen asleep. Look, I saw them taking Weasley up to the hospital wing earlier. Didn't look like he'll be fit for next week's match."

It took Harry a few moments to realize what McLaggen was talking about.

"Oh . . . right . . . Quidditch," he said, putting his wand back into the belt of his jeans and running a hand wearily through his hair. "Yeah . . . he might not make it."

"Well, then, I'll be playing Keeper, won't I?" said McLaggen.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah, I suppose so. . . ."

He could not think of an argument against it; after all, McLaggen

had certainly performed second-best in the trials.

“Excellent,” said McLaggen in a satisfied voice. “So when’s practice?”

“What? Oh . . . there’s one tomorrow evening.”

“Good. Listen, Potter, we should have a talk beforehand. I’ve got some ideas on strategy you might find useful.”

“Right,” said Harry unenthusiastically. “Well, I’ll hear them tomorrow, then. I’m pretty tired now . . . see you . . .”

The news that Ron had been poisoned spread quickly next day, but it did not cause the sensation that Katie’s attack had done. People seemed to think that it might have been an accident, given that he had been in the Potions master’s room at the time, and that as he had been given an antidote immediately there was no real harm done. In fact, the Gryffindors were generally much more interested in the upcoming Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, for many of them wanted to see Zacharias Smith, who played Chaser on the Hufflepuff team, punished soundly for his commentary during the opening match against Slytherin.

Harry, however, had never been less interested in Quidditch; he was rapidly becoming obsessed with Draco Malfoy. Still checking the Marauder’s Map whenever he got a chance, he sometimes made detours to wherever Malfoy happened to be, but had not yet detected him doing anything out of the ordinary. And still there were those inexplicable times when Malfoy simply vanished from the map. . . .

But Harry did not get a lot of time to consider the problem, what with Quidditch practice, homework, and the fact that he was now being dogged wherever he went by Cormac McLaggen and Lavender

Brown.

He could not decide which of them was more annoying. McLaggen kept up a constant stream of hints that he would make a better permanent Keeper for the team than Ron, and that now that Harry was seeing him play regularly he would surely come around to this way of thinking too; he was also keen to criticize the other players and provide Harry with detailed training schemes, so that more than once Harry was forced to remind him who was Captain.

Meanwhile, Lavender kept sidling up to Harry to discuss Ron, which Harry found almost more wearing than McLaggen's Quidditch lectures. At first, Lavender had been very annoyed that nobody had thought to tell her that Ron was in the hospital wing — "I mean, I *am* his girlfriend!" — but unfortunately she had now decided to forgive Harry this lapse of memory and was keen to have lots of in-depth chats with him about Ron's feelings, a most uncomfortable experience that Harry would have happily forgone.

"Look, why don't you talk to Ron about all this?" Harry asked, after a particularly long interrogation from Lavender that took in everything from precisely what Ron had said about her new dress robes to whether or not Harry thought that Ron considered his relationship with Lavender to be "serious."

"Well, I would, but he's always asleep when I go and see him!" said Lavender fretfully.

"Is he?" said Harry, surprised, for he had found Ron perfectly alert every time he had been up to the hospital wing, both highly interested in the news of Dumbledore and Snape's row and keen to abuse McLaggen as much as possible.

“Is Hermione Granger still visiting him?” Lavender demanded suddenly.

“Yeah, I think so. Well, they’re friends, aren’t they?” said Harry uncomfortably.

“Friends, don’t make me laugh,” said Lavender scornfully. “She didn’t talk to him for weeks after he started going out with me! But I suppose she wants to make up with him now he’s all *interesting*. . . .”

“Would you call getting poisoned being interesting?” asked Harry. “Anyway — sorry, got to go — there’s McLaggen coming for a talk about Quidditch,” said Harry hurriedly, and he dashed sideways through a door pretending to be solid wall and sprinted down the shortcut that would take him off to Potions where, thankfully, neither Lavender nor McLaggen could follow him.

On the morning of the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, Harry dropped in on the hospital wing before heading down to the pitch. Ron was very agitated; Madam Pomfrey would not let him go down to watch the match, feeling it would overexcite him.

“So how’s McLaggen shaping up?” he asked Harry nervously, apparently forgetting that he had already asked the same question twice.

“I’ve told you,” said Harry patiently, “he could be world-class and I wouldn’t want to keep him. He keeps trying to tell everyone what to do, he thinks he could play every position better than the rest of us. I can’t wait to be shot of him. And speaking of getting shot of people,” Harry added, getting to his feet and picking up his Firebolt, “will you stop pretending to be asleep when Lavender comes to see you? She’s

driving me mad as well.”

“Oh,” said Ron, looking sheepish. “Yeah. All right.”

“If you don’t want to go out with her anymore, just tell her,” said Harry.

“Yeah . . . well . . . it’s not that easy, is it?” said Ron. He paused. “Hermione going to look in before the match?” he added casually.

“No, she’s already gone down to the pitch with Ginny.”

“Oh,” said Ron, looking rather glum. “Right. Well, good luck. Hope you hammer McLag — I mean, Smith.”

“I’ll try,” said Harry, shouldering his broom. “See you after the match.”

He hurried down through the deserted corridors; the whole school was outside, either already seated in the stadium or heading down toward it. He was looking out of the windows he passed, trying to gauge how much wind they were facing, when a noise ahead made him glance up and he saw Malfoy walking toward him, accompanied by two girls, both of whom looked sulky and resentful.

Malfoy stopped short at the sight of Harry, then gave a short, humorless laugh and continued walking.

“Where’re you going?” Harry demanded.

“Yeah, I’m really going to tell you, because it’s your business, Potter,” sneered Malfoy. “You’d better hurry up, they’ll be waiting for ‘the Chosen Captain’ — ‘the Boy Who Scored’ — whatever they call you these days.”

One of the girls gave an unwilling giggle. Harry stared at her. She blushed. Malfoy pushed past Harry and she and her friend followed at a trot, turning the corner and vanishing from view.

Harry stood rooted on the spot and watched them disappear. This was infuriating; he was already cutting it fine to get to the match on time and yet there was Malfoy, skulking off while the rest of the school was absent: Harry's best chance yet of discovering what Malfoy was up to. The silent seconds trickled past, and Harry remained where he was, frozen, gazing at the place where Malfoy had vanished. . . .

"Where have you been?" demanded Ginny, as Harry sprinted into the changing rooms. The whole team was changed and ready; Coote and Peakes, the Beaters, were both hitting their clubs nervously against their legs.

"I met Malfoy," Harry told her quietly, as he pulled his scarlet robes over his head.

"So?"

"So I wanted to know how come he's up at the castle with a couple of girlfriends while everyone else is down here. . . ."

"Does it matter right now?"

"Well, I'm not likely to find out, am I?" said Harry, seizing his Firebolt and pushing his glasses straight. "Come on then!"

And without another word, he marched out onto the pitch to deafening cheers and boos.

There was little wind; the clouds were patchy; every now and then there were dazzling flashes of bright sunlight.

"Tricky conditions!" McLaggen said bracingly to the team. "Coote, Peakes, you'll want to fly out of the sun, so they don't see you coming
—"

"I'm the Captain, McLaggen, shut up giving them instructions,"

said Harry angrily. “Just get up by the goalposts!”

Once McLaggen had marched off, Harry turned to Coote and Peakes.

“Make sure you *do* fly out of the sun,” he told them grudgingly.

He shook hands with the Hufflepuff Captain, and then, on Madam Hooch’s whistle, kicked off and rose into the air, higher than the rest of his team, streaking around the pitch in search of the Snitch. If he could catch it good and early, there might be a chance he could get back up to the castle, seize the Marauder’s Map, and find out what Malfoy was doing. . . .

“And that’s Smith of Hufflepuff with the Quaffle,” said a dreamy voice, echoing over the grounds. “He did the commentary last time, of course, and Ginny Weasley flew into him, I think probably on purpose, it looked like it. Smith was being quite rude about Gryffindor, I expect he regrets that now he’s playing them — oh, look, he’s lost the Quaffle, Ginny took it from him, I do like her, she’s very nice. . . .”

Harry stared down at the commentator’s podium. Surely nobody in their right mind would have let Luna Lovegood commentate? But even from above there was no mistaking that long, dirty-blond hair, nor the necklace of butterbeer corks. . . . Beside Luna, Professor McGonagall was looking slightly uncomfortable, as though she was indeed having second thoughts about this appointment.

“. . . but now that big Hufflepuff player’s got the Quaffle from her, I can’t remember his name, it’s something like Bibble — no, Buggins —”

“It’s Cadwallader!” said Professor McGonagall loudly from

beside Luna. The crowd laughed.

Harry stared around for the Snitch; there was no sign of it. Moments later, Cadwallader scored. McLaggen had been shouting criticism at Ginny for allowing the Quaffle out of her possession, with the result that he had not noticed the large red ball soaring past his right ear.

“McLaggen, will you pay attention to what you’re supposed to be doing and leave everyone else alone!” bellowed Harry, wheeling around to face his Keeper.

“You’re not setting a great example!” McLaggen shouted back, red-faced and furious.

“And Harry Potter’s now having an argument with his Keeper,” said Luna serenely, while both Hufflepuffs and Slytherins below in the crowd cheered and jeered. “I don’t think that’ll help him find the Snitch, but maybe it’s a clever ruse. . . .”

Swearing angrily, Harry spun round and set off around the pitch again, scanning the skies for some sign of the tiny, winged golden ball.

Ginny and Demelza scored a goal apiece, giving the red-and-gold-clad supporters below something to cheer about. Then Cadwallader scored again, making things level, but Luna did not seem to have noticed; she appeared singularly uninterested in such mundane things as the score, and kept attempting to draw the crowd’s attention to such things as interestingly shaped clouds and the possibility that Zacharias Smith, who had so far failed to maintain possession of the Quaffle for longer than a minute, was suffering from something called “Loser’s Lurgy.”

“Seventy-fourty to Hufflepuff!” barked Professor McGonagall into Luna’s megaphone.

“Is it, already?” said Luna vaguely. “Oh, look! The Gryffindor Keeper’s got hold of one of the Beater’s bats.”

Harry spun around in midair. Sure enough, McLaggen, for reasons best known to himself, had pulled Peakes’s bat from him and appeared to be demonstrating how to hit a Bludger toward an oncoming Cadwallader.

“Will you give him back his bat and get back to the goalposts!” roared Harry, pelting toward McLaggen just as McLaggen took a ferocious swipe at the Bludger and mishit it.

A blinding, sickening pain . . . a flash of light . . . distant screams . . . and the sensation of falling down a long tunnel . . .

And the next thing Harry knew, he was lying in a remarkably warm and comfortable bed and looking up at a lamp that was throwing a circle of golden light onto a shadowy ceiling. He raised his head awkwardly. There on his left was a familiar-looking, freckly, red-haired person.

“Nice of you to drop in,” said Ron, grinning.

Harry blinked and looked around. Of course: He was in the hospital wing. The sky outside was indigo streaked with crimson. The match must have finished hours ago . . . as had any hope of cornering Malfoy. Harry’s head felt strangely heavy; he raised a hand and felt a stiff turban of bandages.

“What happened?”

“Cracked skull,” said Madam Pomfrey, bustling up and pushing him back against his pillows. “Nothing to worry about, I mended it at

once, but I'm keeping you in overnight. You shouldn't overexert yourself for a few hours."

"I don't want to stay here overnight," said Harry angrily, sitting up and throwing back his covers. "I want to find McLaggen and kill him."

"I'm afraid that would come under the heading of 'overexertion,'" said Madam Pomfrey, pushing him firmly back onto the bed and raising her wand in a threatening manner. "You will stay here until I discharge you, Potter, or I shall call the headmaster."

She bustled back into her office, and Harry sank back into his pillows, fuming.

"D'you know how much we lost by?" he asked Ron through clenched teeth.

"Well, yeah I do," said Ron apologetically. "Final score was three hundred and twenty to sixty."

"Brilliant," said Harry savagely. "Really brilliant! When I get hold of McLaggen —"

"You don't want to get hold of him, he's the size of a troll," said Ron reasonably. "Personally, I think there's a lot to be said for hexing him with that toenail thing of the Prince's. Anyway, the rest of the team might've dealt with him before you get out of here, they're not happy. . . ."

There was a note of badly suppressed glee in Ron's voice; Harry could tell he was nothing short of thrilled that McLaggen had messed up so badly. Harry lay there, staring up at the patch of light on the ceiling, his recently mended skull not hurting, precisely, but feeling slightly tender underneath all the bandaging.

“I could hear the match commentary from here,” said Ron, his voice now shaking with laughter. “I hope Luna always commentates from now on. . . . *Loser’s Lurgy* . . .”

But Harry was still too angry to see much humor in the situation, and after a while Ron’s snorts subsided.

“Ginny came in to visit while you were unconscious,” he said, after a long pause, and Harry’s imagination zoomed into overdrive, rapidly constructing a scene in which Ginny, weeping over his lifeless form, confessed her feelings of deep attraction to him while Ron gave them his blessing. . . . “She reckons you only just arrived on time for the match. How come? You left here early enough.”

“Oh . . .” said Harry, as the scene in his mind’s eye imploded. “Yeah . . . well, I saw Malfoy sneaking off with a couple of girls who didn’t look like they wanted to be with him, and that’s the second time he’s made sure he isn’t down on the Quidditch pitch with the rest of the school; he skipped the last match too, remember?” Harry sighed. “Wish I’d followed him now, the match was such a fiasco. . . .”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Ron sharply. “You couldn’t have missed a Quidditch match just to follow Malfoy, you’re the Captain!”

“I want to know what he’s up to,” said Harry. “And don’t tell me it’s all in my head, not after what I overheard between him and Snape —”

“I never said it was all in your head,” said Ron, hoisting himself up on an elbow in turn and frowning at Harry, “but there’s no rule saying only one person at a time can be plotting anything in this place! You’re getting a bit obsessed with Malfoy, Harry. I mean,

thinking about missing a match just to follow him . . .”

“I want to catch him at it!” said Harry in frustration. “I mean, where’s he going when he disappears off the map?”

“I dunno . . . Hogsmeade?” suggested Ron, yawning.

“I’ve never seen him going along any of the secret passageways on the map. I thought they were being watched now anyway?”

“Well then, I dunno,” said Ron.

Silence fell between them. Harry stared up at the circle of lamplight above him, thinking. . . .

If only he had Rufus Scrimgeour’s power, he would have been able to set a tail upon Malfoy, but unfortunately Harry did not have an office full of Aurors at his command. . . . He thought fleetingly of trying to set something up with the D.A., but there again was the problem that people would be missed from lessons; most of them, after all, still had full schedules. . . .

There was a low, rumbling snore from Ron’s bed. After a while Madam Pomfrey came out of her office, this time wearing a thick dressing gown. It was easiest to feign sleep; Harry rolled over onto his side and listened to all the curtains closing themselves as she waved her wand. The lamps dimmed, and she returned to her office; he heard the door click behind her and knew that she was off to bed.

This was, Harry reflected in the darkness, the third time that he had been brought to the hospital wing because of a Quidditch injury. Last time he had fallen off his broom due to the presence of dementors around the pitch, and the time before that, all the bones had been removed from his arm by the incurably inept Professor Lockhart. . . . That had been his most painful injury by far . . . he remembered the

agony of regrowing an armful of bones in one night, a discomfort not eased by the arrival of an unexpected visitor in the middle of the —”

Harry sat bolt upright, his heart pounding, his bandage turban askew. He had the solution at last: There *was* a way to have Malfoy followed — how could he have forgotten, why hadn’t he thought of it before?

But the question was, how to call him? What did you do?

Quietly, tentatively, Harry spoke into the darkness.

“Kreacher?”

There was a very loud *crack*, and the sounds of scuffling and squeaks filled the silent room. Ron awoke with a yelp.

“What’s going — ?”

Harry pointed his wand hastily at the door of Madam Pomfrey’s office and muttered, “*Muffliato!*” so that she would not come running. Then he scrambled to the end of his bed for a better look at what was going on.

Two house-elves were rolling around on the floor in the middle of the dormitory, one wearing a shrunken maroon jumper and several woolly hats, the other, a filthy old rag strung over his hips like a loincloth. Then there was another loud bang, and Peeves the Poltergeist appeared in midair above the wrestling elves.

“I was watching that, Potty!” he told Harry indignantly, pointing at the fight below, before letting out a loud cackle. “Look at the ickle creatures squabbling, bitey bitey, punchy punchy —”

“Kreacher will not insult Harry Potter in front of Dobby, no he won’t, or Dobby will shut Kreacher’s mouth for him!” cried Dobby in a high-pitched voice.

“— kinky, scratchy!” cried Peeves happily, now pelting bits of chalk at the elves to enrage them further. “Tweaky, pokey!”

“Kreacher will say what he likes about his master, oh yes, and what a master he is, filthy friend of Mudbloods, oh, what would poor Kreacher’s mistress say — ?”

Exactly what Kreacher’s mistress would have said they did not find out, for at that moment Dobby sank his knobbly little fist into Kreacher’s mouth and knocked out half of his teeth. Harry and Ron both leapt out of their beds and wrenched the two elves apart, though they continued to try and kick and punch each other, egged on by Peeves, who swooped around the lamp squealing, “Stick your fingers up his nosey, draw his cork and pull his earsies —”

Harry aimed his wand at Peeves and said, “*Langlock!*” Peeves clutched at his throat, gulped, then swooped from the room making obscene gestures but unable to speak, owing to the fact that his tongue had just glued itself to the roof of his mouth.

“Nice one,” said Ron appreciatively, lifting Dobby into the air so that his flailing limbs no longer made contact with Kreacher. “That was another Prince hex, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, twisting Kreacher’s wizened arm into a half nelson. “Right — I’m forbidding you to fight each other! Well, Kreacher, you’re forbidden to fight Dobby. Dobby, I know I’m not allowed to give you orders —”

“Dobby is a free house-elf and he can obey anyone he likes and Dobby will do whatever Harry Potter wants him to do!” said Dobby, tears now streaming down his shriveled little face onto his jumper.

“Okay then,” said Harry, and he and Ron both released the elves,

who fell to the floor but did not continue fighting.

“Master called me?” croaked Kreacher, sinking into a bow even as he gave Harry a look that plainly wished him a painful death.

“Yeah, I did,” said Harry, glancing toward Madam Pomfrey’s office door to check that the *Muffliato* spell was still working; there was no sign that she had heard any of the commotion. “I’ve got a job for you.”

“Kreacher will do whatever Master wants,” said Kreacher, sinking so low that his lips almost touched his gnarled toes, “because Kreacher has no choice, but Kreacher is ashamed to have such a master, yes —”

“Dobby will do it, Harry Potter!” squeaked Dobby, his tennis-ball-sized eyes still swimming in tears. “Dobby would be honored to help Harry Potter!”

“Come to think of it, it would be good to have both of you,” said Harry. “Okay then . . . I want you to tail Draco Malfoy.”

Ignoring the look of mingled surprise and exasperation on Ron’s face, Harry went on, “I want to know where he’s going, who he’s meeting, and what he’s doing. I want you to follow him around the clock.”

“Yes, Harry Potter!” said Dobby at once, his great eyes shining with excitement. “And if Dobby does it wrong, Dobby will throw himself off the topmost tower, Harry Potter!”

“There won’t be any need for that,” said Harry hastily.

“Master wants me to follow the youngest of the Malfoys?” croaked Kreacher. “Master wants me to spy upon the pure-blood great-nephew of my old mistress?”

“That’s the one,” said Harry, foreseeing a great danger and determining to prevent it immediately. “And you’re forbidden to tip him off, Kreacher, or to show him what you’re up to, or to talk to him at all, or to write him messages or . . . or to contact him in any way. Got it?”

He thought he could see Kreacher struggling to see a loophole in the instructions he had just been given and waited. After a moment or two, and to Harry’s great satisfaction, Kreacher bowed deeply again and said, with bitter resentment, “Master thinks of everything, and Kreacher must obey him even though Kreacher would much rather be the servant of the Malfoy boy, oh yes. . . .”

“That’s settled, then,” said Harry. “I’ll want regular reports, but make sure I’m not surrounded by people when you turn up. Ron and Hermione are okay. And don’t tell anyone what you’re doing. Just stick to Malfoy like a couple of wart plasters.”

Elwewales

“So, alles in ag genome, was dit nie een van Ron se beter verjaardae nie?” sê Fred.

Dis aand; die siekeboeg is stil, die gordyne toegetrek, die lampe aangesteek. Ron is die enigste pasiënt. Harry, Hermione en Ginny sit om hom; hulle moes heeldag buite die dubbeldeure wag en binnetoe probeer loer wanneer iemand in- of uitgegaan het. Madame Pomfrey het hulle agtuur eers laat inkom. Fred en George het tien oor daar aangekom.

“Dis nie hoe ons gedink het ons jou present vir jou gaan gee nie,” sê George strak en sit ’n groot opgemaakte pakkie op Ron se bedkassie neer. Hy kom sit langs Ginny.

“Ja, ons het ons die toneel voorgestel met hom by sy volle bewussyn,” sê Fred.

“Ons was in Hogsmeade; ons wou hom daar verras —” sê George.

“Was julle in Hogsmeade?” vra Ginny en kyk op.

“Ons het daaraan gedink om Zonko se plek te koop,” sê Fred somber. “’n Hogsmeade-tak, weet jy, maar wat sal dit ons in die sak bring as julle klomp nie meer naweke mag uitkom om ons goed te koop nie ... maar vergeet nou maar daarvan.”

Hy sleep ’n stoel nader en kom sit langs Harry wat na Ron se bleek gesig staar.

“Hoe het dit gebeur, Harry?”

Harry vertel weer die storie, al voel dit vir hom hy het dit omtrent al ’n honderd keer vir Dumbledore, vir McGonagall, vir Madame Pomfrey, vir Hermione en vir Ginny vertel.

“... en toe druk ek die besoarsteen in sy keel af en toe begin hy effens makliker asemhaal. Slughorn het gaan hulp roep, McGonagall en Madame Pomfrey het daar ingestorm en hulle het Ron hierheen gebring. Hulle reken hy sal oukei wees. Madame Pomfrey sê hy sal so ’n week of wat hier moet bly ... en aanhou om Weemoedessens te drink ...”

“Flippit, dankie tog jy’t aan ’n besoarsteen gedink,” sê George in ’n skor stem.

“Dankie tog daar was een in Slughorn se kantoor,” sê Harry, wat elke keer yskoud word by die gedagte aan wat kon gebeur het as hy nie die steentjie in die hande gekry het nie.

Hermione snuif amper onhoorbaar. Sy is heeldag al buitengewoon stil. Sy het met ’n spierwit gesig op siekeboeg toe gestorm en daarop aangedring om te weet wat gebeur het, maar beswaarlik aan Harry en Ginny se onophoudelike bespreking van hoe Ron vergiftig is, deelgeneem. Sy het net by hulle gesit, met geklemde kake en ’n verskrikte uitdrukking, tot hulle uiteindelik by Ron toegelaat is.

“Weet Ma en Pa?” vra Fred vir Ginny.

“Hulle het hom al klaar gesien; hulle het ’n uur gelede hier aangekom – hulle is nou in Dumbledore se kantoor, maar hulle sal netnou terug wees ...”

Daar is ’n stilte terwyl almal vir Ron kyk wat in sy slaap mompel.

“So die gif was in die drankie?” vra Fred sag.

“Ja,” sê Harry dadelik; hy kan aan niks anders dink nie en is maar te bly om die kans te kry om alles weer te bespreek. “Slughorn het dit ingeskink –”

“Sou hy iets in Ron se glas kon gegooi het sonder dat jy dit gesien het?”

“Dis moontlik,” sê Harry, “maar hoekom sal Slughorn vir Ron wil vergiftig?”

“G’n idee nie,” sê Fred fronsend. “Jy dink nie hy’t die glase dalk per ongeluk omgeruil nie? Dit was dalk vir jou bedoel.”

“Hoekom sal Slughorn Harry wil vergiftig?” vra Ginny.

“Ek weet nie,” sê Fred, “maar daar moet baie mense wees wat Harry graag sal wil vergiftig. Oor die ‘Uitverkorene’-storie en als.”

“So dink jy Slughorn is ’n Doodseter?” wil Ginny weet.

“Enigiets is moontlik,” sê Fred stroef.

“Hy is dalk onder die Imperiusvloek,” sê George.

“Of hy is dalk onskuldig,” sê Ginny. “Die gif was dalk in die bottel, wat beteken dit was dalk vir Slughorn bedoel.”

“Wie sal Slughorn wil doodmaak?”

“Dumbledore reken Voldemort wou Slughorn aan sy kant gehad het,” sê Harry. “Slughorn het vir ’n jaar weggekruipe voor hy Hogwarts toe gekom het. En ...” hy dink aan die herinneringe wat Dumbledore nie uit Slughorn kon trek nie, “en miskien wil Voldemort hom uit die pad hê; miskien dink hy Slughorn kan dalk van waarde wees vir Dumbledore.”

“Maar jy’t gesê Slughorn was van plan om daai bottel vir Dumbledore te gee as ’n Kerspresent,” herinner Ginny hom. “So die gif kon baie maklik vir Dumbledore bedoel gewees het.”

“Dan ken die gifmoordenaar Slughorn nie baie goed nie,” sê Hermione vir die eerste keer ná ure iets en dit klink of sy ’n baie swaar verkoue het. “Enigiemand wat Slughorn ken, sal weet die kanse is goed dat hy iets wat so lekker is vir homself sal hou.”

“Hir-maai-niee,” kreun Ron skielik onverwags.

Hulle word almal stil en hou hom angstig dop, maar ná ’n oomblik se onverstaanbare geprewel begin hy snork.

Die slaapsaal se deure vlieg oop en almal skrik; Hagrid kom na hulle toe aangeloop met ’n kruisboog in sy hand, sy hare nat van die reën, sy bewerveljas flappend agter hom, en ’n streep modderige voetspore so groot soos dolfyne op die vloer agter hom.

“Heeldag in die Woud gewees!” hyg hy. “Aragog gaan agteruit. Ek het heeldag vir hom gelees – het nou eers by aandete uitgekom en toe vertel professor Sprout my van Ron. Hoe gaan dit met hom?”

“Nie sleg nie,” sê Harry. “Hulle sê hy sal oukei wees.”

“Nie meer as ses besoekers op ’n slag nie!” sê Madame Pomfrey, wat haastig by haar kantoor uitkom.

“Hagrid maak dit ses,” wys George haar daarop.

“O ... ja ...” sê Madame Pomfrey, wat Hagrid blykbaar vir verskeie mense getel het omdat hy so yslik groot is. Om haar verwarring weg te steek, skarrel sy weg om sy modderige voetspore met haar towerstaf op te vee.

“Ek glo dit nie,” sê Hagrid hees en skud sy groot, harige kop terwyl hy na Ron afstaar. “Glo dit g’n ... Kyk net hoe lê hy hier ... Wie sal hom nou wil seermaak, hè?”

“Dis presies waarom ons gepraat het,” sê Harry. “Ons weet nie.”

“Miskien het iemand ’n wrok teen Gryffindor se Kwiddiekspan?” sê Hagrid benoud. “Eers Katie, nou Ron ...”

“Ek kan darem nie dink dat iemand ’n Kwiddiekspan sal wil afmaai nie,” sê George.

“Wood sou dit met die Slytherins gedoen het as hy daarmee sou kon wegkom,” sê Fred billikheidsonthalwe.

“Wel, ek dink nie dis Kwiddiek nie, maar ek dink daar is ’n verband tussen die aanvalle,” sê Hermione sag.

“Hoe kom jy daarby uit?” vra Fred.

“Wel, eerstens was albei veronderstel om noodlottig te wees en was nie, hoewel dit blote geluk was. En tweedens het nóg die gif nóg die halssnoer blykbaar uitgekom by die persoon wat veronderstel was om doodgemaak te word. En dit,” voeg sy peinsend by,

“maak die persoon wat hieragter sit natuurlik op ’n manier selfs nóg gevaarliker, want dit lyk nie of hy of sy omgee hoeveel mense uit die weg geruim word tot die slagoffer aan die pen ry nie.”

Voor enigiemand op hierdie onheilspellende aankondiging kan reageer, gaan die slaapsaal se deure weer oop en meneer en mevrou Weasley kom haastig by die siekeboeg in. Tydens hul vorige besoek het hulle nie veel meer gedoen as om hulself te vergewis van die feit dat Ron weer ten volle sal herstel nie; nou gryp mevrou Weasley Harry en druk hom styf vas.

“Dumbledore het vir ons vertel hoe jy sy lewe met die besoarsteen gered het,” sê sy snikkend. “O, Harry, wat kan ons sê? Jy het Ginny se lewe gered ... en Arthur s’n ... en nou het jy Ron ook gered ...”

“Moenie ... ek het nie ...” mompel Harry ongemaklik.

“Noudat ek daaraan dink – die helfte van ons gesin is hul lewe aan jou te danke,” sê meneer Weasley in ’n skor stem. “Wel, al wat ek kan sê, is dit was ’n gelukkige dag vir die Weasleys toe Ron besluit het om in jou kompartement op die Hogwarts Express te sit, Harry.”

Harry kan nie aan ’n antwoord hierop dink nie en is amper bly toe Madame Pomfrey hulle weer daaraan herinner dat daar net ses besoekers om Ron se bed mag wees. Hy en Hermione staan dadelik op en gaan uit; Hagrid kom saam met hulle sodat Ron se familie alleen by hom kan wees.

“Dis liederlik,” grom Hagrid in sy baard terwyl hulle drie met die gang af na die marmertap toe loop. “Al hierdie nuwe sekuriteit en die kinders kry nog steeds seer ... Dumbledore is siek van bekomernis ... Hy sê niks, maar ek kan sien ...”

“Het hy nie enige idees nie, Hagrid?” vra Hermione desperaat.

“Ek is vermoed hy’t honderde idees, met ’n brein soos syne,” sê Hagrid lojaal. “Maar hy weet nie wie’t daai halssnoer gestuur en wie’t gif in daai wyn gesit nie, anders sou hulle mos al gevang gewees het, of hoe? Wat my pla,” sê Hagrid terwyl hy sy stem laat sak en oor sy skouer loer (om honderd persent seker te maak kyk Harry ook of Peeves nie iewers teen die plafon wegkruip nie), “is hoe lank Hogwarts sal kan oopbly as die kinders só aangeval word. Dis nou weer die Kamer van Geheimenisse van voor af, nè? Mense sal paniekerig raak, hul kinders uit die skool vat en as jy weer sien, sal die beheerraad ...”

Hagrid hou op praat toe ’n langhaarvrou se spook rustig verbysweef en gaan dan in ’n hees fluisterstem aan, “... die beheerraad sal daaraan begin dink om ons vir goed toe te maak.”

“Ag nooit,” sê Hermione en lyk bekommerd.

“Jy moet dit uit hulle oogpunt sien,” sê Hagrid beswaard. “Ek bedoel, dit was nog altyd ’n bietjie van ’n risiko om ’n kind Hogwarts toe te stuur, nè? Jy verwag ongelukke, of hoe, met honderde minderjarige towenaars almal bymekaar gegooi, maar ’n poging tot moord, dis iets anders. G’n wonder Dumbledore is kwaad vir Sn—”

Hagrid steek in sy spore vas en hulle sien die bekende, skuldige uitdrukking op die deel van sy gesig wat bo sy gekoekte swart baard sigbaar is.

“Wat?” vra Harry vinnig. “Is Dumbledore kwaad vir Snape?”

“Ek het dit nie gesê nie, hoor,” sê Hagrid en die paniek op sy gesig gee hom totaal weg. “Kyk hoe laat is dit, al amper middernag; ek moet huis —”

“Hagrid, hoekom is Dumbledore kwaad vir Snape?” vra Harry hard.

“Sjuuuuuuut!” sê Hagrid en lyk tegelyk senuagtig en kwaad. “Moenie sulke goed so uitblaker nie, Harry! Wil jy hê ek moet my werk verloor? Alhoewel, jy gee seker nie om nie; want julle doen nie meer Versorging van Mag —”

“Moenie probeer om my skuldig te laat voel nie; dit sal nie werk nie!” sê Harry vurig. “Wat het Snape gedoen?”

“Ek weet nie, Harry; ek was nie veronderstel om dit te hoor nie! Ek — wel, ek het nou die aand by die Woud uitgekom en toe hoor ek hulle praat — wel, stry. Ek wou hulle nie pla nie, toe hou ek my maar skaars en probeer om nie te luister nie, maar daar het — wel, daar het nogal harde woorde geval en dit was onmoontlik om dit nie te hoor nie.”

“Vertel,” por Harry aan terwyl Hagrid ongemaklik met sy enorme voete rondtrap.

“Wel — ek het net gehoor Snape sê Dumbledore aanvaar te veel dinge as vanselfsprekend en dat hy wat Snape is dit dalk nie meer wil doen nie —”

“Wat nie wil doen nie?”

“Ek weet nie, Harry. Dit het geklink of Snape bietjie oorwerk voel, dis al — elk geval, Dumbledore het prontuit vir hom gesê hy’t ingestem om dit te doen en klaar. Baie streng met hom gewees. En toe’t hy iets gesê van Snape wat in sy huis moet ondersoek instel, in Slytherin. Wel, daar’s niks snaaks daaraan nie!” voeg Hagrid vinnig by terwyl Harry en Hermione betekenisvol vir mekaar kyk. “Al die Huishoofde is gevra om op daai halssnoerbesigheid in te gaan —”

“Ja, maar Dumbledore stry nie met die res van hulle nie, of hoe?” wil Harry weet.

“Luister,” sê Hagrid en sy hande vroetel senuweeagtig met sy kruisboog, daar is ’n harde klapgeluid en dit breek in twee, “ek weet

jy hou nie van Snape nie en ek wil nie hê jy moet meer hierin lees as wat daar is nie.”

“Oppas,” sê Hermione kortaf.

Hulle draai net betyds om om Argus Filch se skaduwee teen die muur agter hulle te sien opdoem voor hy met sy boggelrug en tril-lende neusvleuels om die draai kom.

“Oho!” hyg hy. “Hierdie tyd van die nag uit die bed! Dit beteken detensie!”

“Nee, Filch,” sê Hagrid skerp. “Hulle’s by my, jy sien mos.”

“En watse verskil maak dit miskien?” vra Filch astringent.

“Ek’s ’n blêrrie onderwyser, jou sluipende Sisser!” sê Hagrid dadelik ontstoke.

Daar is ’n nare siggeluid soos wat Filch hom opblaas van woede; mevrou Norris het intussen ongemerk verskyn en sy vleg haar kronkelend om Filch se benerige enkels.

“Weg is julle,” sê Hagrid uit die hoek van sy mond.

Dit is nie nodig om dit twee keer te sê nie; Harry en Hermione gee haastig pad terwyl Hagrid en Filch se harde stemme agter hulle aan eggo. Hulle hardloop verby Peeves naby die plek waar hulle na die Gryffindortoring toe moet indraai; hy is vrolik op pad na die bron van die geskree terwyl hy gil, kekkel en kraai:

*“Is daar iewers ’n gestry en ’n gekibbel?
Roep vir Peevsie; hy sal dit verdubbel!”*

Die Vet Vrou dut al en is vies toe hulle haar wakker maak, maar sy swaai brom-brom vorentoe en hulle klim dankbaar deur tot in die rustige en leë geselskamer. Dit lyk nie of iemand al van Ron weet nie; Harry is verlig, want hy het vandag al genoeg vrae beantwoord. Hermione sê vir hom nag en gaan na die meisies se slaapsaal toe, maar Harry bly agter. Hy gaan sit in ’n stoel by die vuur en tuur in die kole wat al amper as is.

Dumbledore het dus gestry met Snape. Ten spyte van alles wat hy vir Harry gesê het, ten spyte daarvan dat hy volgehou het hy vertrou Snape ten volle, het hy sy humeur met hom verloor ... Hy dink nie Snape ondersoek die Slytherins deeglik genoeg nie ... of miskien moet hy net een Slytherin ondersoek: Malfoy?

Is dit omdat Dumbledore nie wil hê Harry moet iets doms aanvang of eie reg gebruik nie dat hy voorgegee het daar steek niks in Harry se vermoedens nie? Dit is baie moontlik. Dit mag dalk selfs wees dat Dumbledore nie wil hê enigiets moet Harry se aandag aflei van hul lesse of van sy opdrag om Slughorn se herinnering in die

hande te kry nie. Miskien voel Dumbledore dit is nie reg om sy agterdog teenoor 'n personeellid met 'n sestienjarige te bespreek nie ...

“A, daar is jy, Potter!”

Harry spring op van die skrik, sy towerstaf gereed. Hy was doodseker die geselskamer is leeg; hy was die logge figuur wat skielik onverwags uit 'n stoel ver van hom opkom, glad nie te wagte nie. Hy kyk weer en besef dit is Cormac McLaggen.

“Ek het vir jou gewag om terug te kom,” sê McLaggen, wat Harry se ontblote towerstaf ignoreer. “Ek moet aan die slaap geraak het. Hoor hier, ek het Weasley gesien toe hulle hom siekeboeg toe dra. Lyk nie of hy reg sal wees vir volgende week se wedstryd nie.”

Dit neem Harry 'n paar oomblikke om te besef waarvan McLaggen praat.

“O ja ... reg ... Kwiddiek,” sê hy. Hy steek sy towerstaf by sy jeans se belt in en trek sy hand moeg deur sy hare. “Ja ... hy sal dit dalk nie maak nie.”

“Wel, dan kan ek Wagter speel, of hoe?” vra McLaggen.

“Ja,” sê Harry. “Ja, seker ...”

Hy kan nie aan 'n teenargument dink nie; per slot van rekening het McLaggen tweede beste in die proewe gevaar.

“Uitstekend,” sê McLaggen tevrede. “So wanneer oefen ons?”

“Wat? O ... môre aand.”

“Raait. Luister, Potter, ons moet voor die tyd praat. Ek het 'n paar idees oor strategie wat jy dalk handig sal vind.”

“Reg,” sê Harry onentoesiasties. “Wel, ons praat môre daaroor. Ek is nou nogal moeg ... Sien jou ...”

Die nuus dat Ron vergiftig is, versprei die volgende dag vinnig, maar dit veroorsaak nie soveel sensasie soos die aanval op Katie nie. Mense dink dit was dalk 'n ongeluk aangesien hy ten tye van die voorval by die Towerdrankieonderwyser was, en dat daar geen werklike skade aangerig is nie omdat hy dadelik 'n teenmiddel toegedien is. Om die waarheid te sê, stel die Gryffindors oor die algemeen baie meer in die eerskomende Kwiddiekwedstryd teen Hoesenproes belang, want baie van hulle wil hê Zacharias Smith, een van die Hoesenproesers se Jaers, moet ordentlik gestraf word vir sy kommentaar tydens hul eerste wedstryd teen Slytherin.

Harry het egter nog nooit minder in Kwiddiek belang gestel nie; hy is besig om 'n obsessie oor Draco Malfoy te ontwikkel. Wanneer hy 'n kans kry, kyk hy nog steeds op die Plunderaar se Kaart en loop soms ompaai om te gaan kyk wat Malfoy aanvang, maar hy het hom tot dusver nie betrap dat hy enigiets buitengewoons doen nie.

En dan is daar nog daardie onverklaarbare kere wanneer Malfoy net eenvoudig van die kaart af verdwyn ...

Maar Harry het nie baie tyd om hierdie probleem uit te pluus nie vanweë Kwiddiekoefening, huiswerk en die feit dat hy deesdae waar hy ook al gaan deur Cormac McLaggen en Lavender Brown agtervolg word.

Hy kan nie besluit wie van hulle hom die meeste irriteer nie. McLaggen skimp aanhoudend dat hy 'n beter permanente Wagter vir die span sal wees as Ron, en dat Harry binnekort ook so sal dink noudat hy hom gereeld sien speel; hy is ook gretig om die ander spelers te kritiseer en kom gedurig vorendag met ellelange voorstelle oor hoe hulle moet oefen. Harry moes hom al meer as een keer herinner aan wie nou eintlik die kaptein is.

Intussen kom Lavender die hele tyd stroperig met hom oor Ron praat; Harry vind dit amper nog meer uitputtend as McLaggen se preke oor Kwiddiek. Lavender was aanvanklik baie vies dat niemand daaraan gedink het om vir haar te sê Ron is in die siekeboeg nie – “Ek bedoel, ek is sy meisie! – maar ongelukkig het sy nou besluit om Harry vir hierdie glips te vergewe en sy wil gereeld diep gesprekke met hom voer oor Ron se gevoelens, 'n ongemaklike ervaring wat Harry baie graag sou wou vermy.

“Luister, hoekom praat jy nie met Ron hieroor nie?” sê Harry ná 'n besonder lang ondervraging waartydens Lavender alles en nog wat wou weet: van wat Ron van haar nuwe uitrustings sê tot of Harry dink Ron beskou sy verhouding met haar as “ernstig”.

“Wel, ek wil graag, maar hy slaap altyd wanneer ek by hom kom!” sê Lavender knorrig.

“Is dit?” vra Harry verras, want elke keer dat hy siekeboeg toe gaan, is Ron op en wakker en vra hy nuuskierig uit oor nuus van Dumbledore en Snape se stryery; hy laat verder ook nie 'n kans verbygaan om McLaggen af te kraak nie.

“Gaan Hermione Granger nog by hom kuier?” wil Lavender skielik weet.

“Jip, ek dink so. Hulle is mos vriende, of hoe?” sê Harry ongemaklik.

“Vriende, moenie dat ek lag nie,” sê Lavender vol veragting. “Sy't vir weke nie met hom gepraat toe hy met my begin uitgaan het nie! Maar sy wil natuurlik nou met hom opmaak, noudat hy *interessant* is ...”

“Dink jy dis interessant om vergiftig te word?” vra Harry. “In elk geval – jammer, ek moet hol – daar kom McLaggen nou; hy wil oor Kwiddiek gesels,” sê Harry haastig. Hy skiet sywaarts in by 'n deur

wat oënskynlik 'n soliede muur is en hardloop met 'n kortpad waarlangs McLaggen of Lavender hom genadiglik nie kan volg nie na sy Towerdrankieklas.

Die oggend van die Kwiddiekwedstryd teen Hoesenproes loer Harry eers by die siekeboeg in voor hy af veld toe gaan. Ron is in 'n toestand; Madame Pomfrey wil hom nie toelaat om die wedstryd te gaan kyk nie, want sy voel hy sal hom te veel opwen.

“So, hoe kom McLaggen aan?” vra hy gespanne vir Harry; hy het blykbaar vergeet hy het dieselfde vraag reeds twee keer gevra.

“Ek het jou gesê,” antwoord Harry geduldig, “al is hy wêreldklas wil ek hom nie in die span hou nie, want hy probeer heeltyd vir almal sê wat om te doen; hy dink hy kan in elke posisie beter as die res van ons speel. Ek kan nie wag om van hom ontslae te raak nie. En gepraat van ontslae raak van mense,” voeg Harry by terwyl hy op die been kom en sy Vuurslag optel, “hou op maak of jy slaap wanneer Lavender vir jou kom kuier. Sy maak my ook mal.”

“O,” sê Ron en lyk verleë. “Ja, oukei.”

“As jy nie meer met haar wil uitgaan nie, sê haar net,” sê Harry.

“Ja ... wel ... dis nie so maklik nie, is dit?” sê Ron. Hy bly stil. “Gaan Hermione voor die wedstryd kom hallo sê?” vra hy doodluiters.

“Nee, sy's al klaar saam met Ginny af veld toe.”

“O,” sê Ron en lyk nogal bekaf. “Reg. Wel, voorspoed. Hoop jy moker McLag – ek bedoel, Smith.”

“Ek sal probeer,” sê Harry en swaai sy besem oor sy skouer. “Sien jou ná die wedstryd.”

Hy loop haastig met die verlate gange langs; al die studente is buitekant: hulle sit óf reeds in die stadion óf hulle is op pad af soon-toe. Hy kyk by die vensters uit soos wat hy verbyloop en probeer uitmaak hoe sterk die wind is toe 'n geluid van voor hom laat opkyk. Dit is Malfoy wat na hom toe aangeloop kom; daar is twee meisies by hom wat dikmond en gegrief lyk.

Malfoy gaan staan toe hy Harry sien; hy gee 'n kort, humorlose laggie en loop dan verder.

“Waarheen gaan jy?” vra Harry.

“Ja, natuurlik gaan ek vir jou sê, want dit traak jou, Potter,” spot Malfoy. “Jy beter gou maak. Hulle wag vir die Uitverkore kaptein – die Seun Wat Bly Wen – of wat jy jouself ook al deesdae noem.”

Een van die meisies giggel onwillig. Harry gee haar 'n kyk. Sy bloos. Malfoy druk verby Harry; sy en haar vriendin trippel agter hom aan en verdwyn om die hoek en uit sig.

Harry staan vasgenaël daar en kyk hoe hulle verdwyn. Hy is woedend; hy sny sy rieme alreeds fyn om betyds vir die wedstryd te

wees en nou sluip Malfoy hier rond terwyl die res van die skool weg is: Harry kan nie 'n beter kans vra om uit te vind wat Malfoy in die mou voer nie. Die sekondes tik onhoorbaar verby en Harry staan nog steeds daar, roerloos, en staar na die plek waar Malfoy verdwyn het ...

“Waar was jy?” vra Ginny toe Harry by die kleedkamer inhardloop. Die hele span is al aangetrek en gereed; Coote en Peakes, die twee Brekers, slaan gespanne met hul knuppels teen hul bene.

“Ek het Malfoy raakgeloop,” sê Harry sag vir haar terwyl hy sy helderrooi kleed oor sy kop trek.

“En?”

“En toe wou ek weet wat maak hy bo by die kasteel saam met twee meisies terwyl al die ander mense hier onder is ...”

“Maak dit op hierdie oomblik saak?”

“Wel, lyk my nie ek gaan uitvind nie, gaan ek?” sê Harry terwyl hy sy Vuurslag gryp en sy bril regdruk. “Komaan, ouens!”

En sonder een woord verder marsjeer hy onder oorverdowende gejuig en gejl op die veld uit. Daar is min wind en net plek-plek wolke; elke nou en dan kom die helder sonlig verblindend deur. “Bedrieglike toestande!” sê McLaggen opgewek vir die span. “Coote, Peakes, julle moet uit die son se rigting vlieg sodat hulle julle nie kan sien aankom nie – ”

“Ek is die kaptein, McLaggen! Hou op om vir hulle te sê wat om te doen!” sê Harry vererg. “Sorg dat jy bo by die doelpale kom!”

Sodra McLaggen weg is, draai Harry na Coote en Peakes.

“Maak seker julle vlieg wél van die son se kant af,” sê hy onwillig.

Hy skud hande met Hoesenproes se kaptein, Madame Hooch se fluitjie blaas en hy skop vas en vlieg in die lug op, hoër as die res van sy span en begin al om die veld jaag op soek na die Snip. As hy dit vroeg in die wedstryd kan vang, is daar 'n kans dat hy terug by die kasteel kan kom en op die Plunderaar se Kaart kan kyk wat Malfoy doen ...

“En dis Smith van Hoesenproes met die Swelger,” eggo 'n dromerige stem deur die stadion. “Hy was laas die kommentator en Ginny Weasley het ná die tyd in hom vasgevlieg, heel moontlik aspris – dis hoe dit gelyk het. Smith het lelike dinge van Gryffindor gesê en ek dink hy's jammer daaroor noudat hy teen hulle speel – o, kyk, hy't die Swelger verloor; Ginny het dit by hom afgevat – o, ek hou van haar, sy's so gaaf ...”

Harry staar af na die kommentator se podium. Niemand wat by hul volle verstand is, sal mos vir Luna Lovegood die kommentator maak nie? Maar selfs van daar bo af kan Harry nie haar lang, vuilblonde hare en die halssnoer van Botterbierkurkproppe mis kyk nie

... Langs Luna lyk professor McGonagall ietwat ongemaklik, asof sy skielik bedenkinge het oor hierdie aanstelling.

“... maar nou het daardie groot Hoesenproesspeler die Swelger by haar afgevat; ek kan nie sy naam onthou nie; dis iets soos Bibble – nee, Buggins –”

“Dis Cadwallader!” sê professor McGonagall hard langs Luna. Die skare skater. Harry soek oral na die Snip, maar kry nêrens ’n teken daarvan nie. Oomblikke later teken Cadwallader ’n doel aan. McLaggen het só op Ginny geskree omdat sy die Swelger uit haar besit laat gaan het dat hy die groot rooi bal nie reg by sy oor sien verbyvlieg het nie.

“McLaggen, bepaal jou aandag by wat jy veronderstel is om te doen en los die ander uit!” brul Harry terwyl hy omdraai om sy Wagter reg te sien.

“Jy stel nie juis ’n goeie voorbeeld nie!” skree McLaggen rooi in die gesig en woedend terug.

“En nou stry Harry Potter met sy Wagter,” sê Luna rustig terwyl die Hoesenproesers en Slytherins onder in die skare juig en boe. “Ek dink nie dit gaan hom help om die Snip te kry nie, maar miskien is dit ’n slim set ...”

Harry vloek vies, swaai om en begin die veld se omtrek weer verken op soek na die klein, gevleuelde goue balletjie.

Ginny en Demelza teken elkeen onder luide toejuiging van die rooi-en-goud ondersteuners op die pawiljoen ’n doel aan. Dan maak Cadwallader weer so en die spanne is gelykop, maar Luna kom dit blykbaar nie agter nie; sy stel hoegenaamd nie in sulke alledaagse dinge soos die telling belang nie en probeer aanhoudend om die skare se aandag te vestig op dinge soos die wolke se interessante vorms en die moontlikheid dat Zacharias Smith, wat dit tot dusver nie kon regkry om vir langer as ’n minuut in besit van die Swelger te bly nie, aan iets genaamd “Verloorlergie” ly.

“Vier-en-sewentig vir Hoesenproes!” blaf professor McGonagall in Luna se megafoon.

“Is dit moontlik?” vra Luna vaag. “O, kyk! Gryffindor se Wagter het een van die Brekers se knuppels beetgekry!”

Harry tol tussen hemel en aarde om. Sowaar, McLaggen, net hy sal weet hoekom, het Peakes se knuppel by hom gegryp en dit lyk of hy nou vir hom demonstreer hoe om ’n Moker na die aankomende Cadwallader te slaan.

“Gee terug sy knuppel en maak dat jy terug by die doelpale kom!” brul Harry en pyl op McLaggen af net toe McLaggen verwoed na die Moker slaan en dit mis.

'n Verblindende, verlamrende pyn ... 'n ligflits ... gille iewers ver ... dit voel of hy by 'n lang tunnel afval ...

En toe Harry weer sien, lê hy in 'n buitengewoon warm en gemaklike bed en kyk op na 'n lamp wat 'n goue ligsirkel teen 'n plafon vol skaduwees gooi. Hy sukkel om sy kop op te lig. Links van hom is daar 'n vriendelike, sproeterige rooikopfiguur.

"Gaaf van jou om te kom inval," sê Ron met 'n spotlaggie.

Harry knip sy oë en kyk rond. Natuurlik: Hy is in die siekeboeg. Die lug buite is blouswart met donkerrooi strepe. Die wedstryd is seker al ure lank iets van die verlede ... nes sy hoop om Malfoy vas te trek. Harry se kop voel vreemd en swaar; hy lig een hand en voel 'n stywe tulband van verbande.

"Wat het gebeur?"

"Gekraakte skedel," sê Madame Pomfrey, wat nader kom en hom teen sy kussings terugdruk. "Niks om oor bekommerd te wees nie; ek het dit dadelik reggemaak, maar ek gaan jou oornag hier hou. Jy moet jou vir 'n paar uur nie ooreis nie."

"Ek wil nie oornag hier bly nie," sê Harry kwaad terwyl hy regop kom en die beddegoed van hom afgooi. "Ek wil McLaggen gaan soek en hom doodmaak."

"Ek is bevrees dit val onder die opskrif 'ooreis'," sê Madame Pomfrey. Sy druk hom ferm terug in die bed en lig haar towerstaf dreigend. "Jy bly hier tot ek jou ontslaan, Potter, of ek roep die Skoolhoof."

Sy loop terug na haar kantoor en Harry sak siedend terug teen sy kussings.

"Weet jy met hoeveel ons verloor het?" vra hy deur geknersde tande vir Ron.

"Wel ja, ek weet," sê Ron apologeties. "Die eindtelling was driehonderd-en-twintig sestig."

"Briljant," sê Harry blind van woede. "Regtig briljant! As ek daai McLaggen beetkry —"

"Jy wil hom nie beetkry nie; hy's so groot soos 'n trol," sê Ron met reg. "Ek dink daar's baie voor te sê dat jy hom met daai toonaelding van die Prins moet toor. In elk geval, die res van die span sal dalk al met hom afgereken het teen die tyd dat jy hier uitkom; hulle's glad nie gelukkig nie ..."

Ron sukkel om die lekkerkry in sy stem weg te steek; Harry weet hy is in die wolke dat McLaggen so lelik aangejaag het. Harry lê daar en staar op na die ligkol teen die plafon; sy pas reggemaakte skedel pyn nie eintlik nie, maar dit voel effens teer onder al die verbande.

“Ek kon die wedstrydkommentaar hiervandaan hoor,” sê Ron en hy skud nou van die lag. “Ek hoop Luna gaan van nou af altyd die kommentator wees ... *Verloorlergie* ...”

Maar Harry is nog te kwaad om die humor in die situasie te sien en ná 'n ruk hou Ron se geproes op.

“Ginny het kom inloer terwyl jy bewusteloos was,” sê Ron ná 'n lang pouse. Harry se verbeelding gaan op loop en skets dadelik 'n toneel van Ginny wat snikkend oor sy stil ligaam afbuig en haar gevoelens van innige liefde vir hom ontboesem terwyl Ron sy seën oor hulle uitspreek ... “Sy sê jy't net-net voor die wedstryd daar opgedaag. Hoekom? Jy's betyds hier weg.”

“O ...” sê Harry terwyl die toneel voor sy geestesoog ineenstort. “Ja ... wel, ek het Malfoy gesien wegsluip saam met twee meisies wat nie gelyk het of hulle by hom wil wees nie, en dit was die tweede keer dat hy seker gemaak het hy is nie saam met die res van die skool in die Kwiddiekstadion nie. Hy was ook nie by laas keer se wedstryd nie, onthou jy?” Harry sug. “Ek wens nou ek het hom eerder agtervolg; die wedstryd was so 'n gemors ...”

“Moenie simpel wees nie,” sê Ron skerp. “Jy kon mos nie 'n Kwiddiekwedstryd gelos het net om Malfoy te agtervolg nie; jy's die kaptein!”

“Ek wil weet wat hy in die mou voer,” sê Harry. “En moenie vir my sê dis alles in my kop nie, nie ná wat ek hom vir Snape hoor sê het nie –”

“Ek het nie gesê dis alles in jou kop nie,” sê Ron terwyl hy homself op sy elmboë stut en Harry fronsend aankyk, “maar daar's nie 'n reël wat sê net een persoon op 'n slag kan planne beraam in hierdie plek nie! Jy raak nou 'n bietjie té behep met Malfoy, Harry. Ek bedoel, hoe kan jy daaraan dink om 'n wedstryd te los net om hom te agtervolg ...”

“Ek wil hom op heter daad betrap!” sê Harry gefrustreerd. “Ek wil weet waarheen hy gaan wanneer hy so van die kaart af verdwyn!”

“Ek weet nie ... Dalk Hogsmeade toe?” stel Ron gapend voor.

“Ek het hom nog nooit in een van die geheime gange op die kaart gesien nie. En ek dog hulle word in elk geval nou bewaak?”

“Wel, dan weet ek nie,” sê Ron.

Daar daal 'n stilte tussen hulle neer. Harry staar op na die lamplig se sirkel bokant hom en dink ...

As hy net Rufus Scrimgeour se mag gehad het, sou hy Malfoy kon laat agtervolg het, maar ongelukkig het Harry nie 'n kantoor vol Aurors tot sy beskikking nie ... Hy oorweeg dit vlugtig om iets met die DS te probeer reël, maar dan gaan daar weer die probleem wees

dat mense agterkom hulle is nie in hul klasse nie; die meeste van hulle het per slot van rekening nog steeds vol roosters ...

Daar kom 'n diep, dreunende snorkgeluid van Ron se bed af. Ná 'n ruk kom Madame Pomfrey by haar kantoor uit, hierdie keer met 'n dik kamerjapon aan. Dit is maklik om te maak of hy slaap; Harry rol op sy sy en hoor hoe al die gordyne vanself toegaan toe sy haar towerstaf swaai. Die lampe verdof en sy gaan terug na haar kantoor toe; hy hoor die deur agter haar klik en weet sy gaan nou bed toe.

Dit is die derde keer, lê Harry in die donker en dink, dat hy as gevolg van 'n Kwiddiekbесering in die siekeboek beland. Die vorige keer het hy van sy besem afgeval omdat daar Dementors om die veld was en die keer voor dit het die hopeloos onbekwame professor Lockhart al die bene uit sy arm verwyder ... dit was sóver nog verreweg sy pynlikste besering ... hy onthou hoe ondraaglik seer dit was toe al die bene in sy arm binne een nag moes teruggroei; dit was die soort ongemak wat nie verbeter is deur die koms van 'n onverwagte besoeker in die middel van die –

Harry sit kiertsregop; sy hart klop wild, sy verbandtulband sit skeef. Hy het uiteindelik die oplossing: daar is 'n manier hoe hy Malfoy kan laat agtervolg – hoe kon hy vergeet het, hoekom het hy nie vroeër al daaraan gedink nie?

Maar die vraag is, hoe moet hy hom ontbied? Hoe doen 'n mens dit?

Sag, versigtig, praat Harry in die donker.

“Skepsel?”

Daar is 'n baie harde *klap* en geluide van 'n gespartel en geskree vul die stil vertrek. Ron word met 'n gil wakker.

“Wat de – ?”

Harry wys haastig met sy towerstaf na Madame Pomfrey se kantoordeur en prewel: “*Muffliato!*” sodat sy nie moet kom kyk wat aangaan nie. Dan klouter hy tot by sy bed se voetenent om te sien wat aangaan.

Twee huiselwe rol in die middel van die slaapsaal op die vloer rond. Die een dra 'n gekrimpte bruinrooi trui en 'n hele paar wolmusse; die ander een dra net 'n vieslike ou toinglap wat soos 'n lendedoek om sy heupe gebind is. Dan is daar nog 'n harde klapgeluid en Peeves die poltergees verskyn in die lug bokant die twee stoeiende elwe.

“Ek was besig om hulle dop te hou, versPottie!” sê hy verontwaardig vir Harry en beduie na die bakleiery onder hom voor hy hard begin kekkellag. “Kyk net hoe krap en klap die kreature mekaar, iggie-jiggie, oefie-poefie – ”

“Skepsel sal Harry Potter nie voor Dobby beledig nie; nee, hy sal nie, of Dobby sal Skepsel se mond vir hom stilmaak!” skree Dobby in ’n skril stem.

– skoppe en skelle!” roep Peeves vrolik uit terwyl hy die elwe met stukkies kryt bestook om hulle nog kwater te maak. “Byte en smyte!”

“Skepsel sal sê wat hy wil van sy meester, o ja, en wat ’n meester is hy nie, vieslike vriend van Modderbloeders, o, wat sal arme Skepsel se meesteres sê – ?”

Hulle vind nie uit presies wat Skepsel se meesteres sal sê nie, want op daardie oomblik tref Dobby se bulterige klein vuisie Skepsel se mond en slaan die helfte van sy tande uit. Harry en Ron spring al twee uit hul beddens en pluk die twee elwe uitmekaar, al hou hulle nog aan met skop en slaan na mekaar onder aanmoediging van Peeves wat nou al om die lamp warrel en gil: “Druk jou duime in sy neus, trek sy ore en slaan hom pap!”

Harry mik met sy towerstaf na Peeves en sê “*Langlock!*” Peeves gryp na sy keel, sluk swaar en pyl dan by die vertrek uit terwyl hy vuil gebare maak, maar nie kan praat nie, want sy tong is aan sy verhemelte vasgeplak.

“Goeie een,” sê Ron met bewondering en lig Dobby in die lug op sodat hy Skepsel nie meer met sy skoppende bene en swaaiende arms kan bykom nie. “Dit was nog een van die Prins se towerspreuke, nê?”

“Jip,” sê Harry en kry Skepsel se verrimpelde armpie in ’n knel-greep beet. “Reg – ek verbied julle om met mekaar te baklei! Hoor jy, Skepsel; ek verbied jou om met Dobby te baklei. Dobby, ek weet ek mag nie vir jou bevele gee nie –”

“Dobby is ’n vrygestelde huiself en hy kan gehoorsaam wie hy wil en Dobby sal enigiets doen wat Harry Potter wil hê hy moet doen!” sê Dobby en die trane loop van sy plooigesiggie af tot op sy trui.

“Oukei dan,” sê Harry en hy en Ron laat los die elwe, wat op die grond val, maar nie weer begin baklei nie.

“Het Meester my ontbied?” vra Skepsel hees en buig voor Harry terwyl hy hom ’n kyk gee wat hom duidelik ’n pynlike dood toewens.

“Ja, ek het,” sê Harry en kyk na Madame Pomfrey se kantoordeur om seker te maak die *Muffliato* towerspreuk werk nog; maar daar is gelukkig nie enige teken dat sy iets van die geraas gehoor het nie. “Ek het ’n werkie vir jou.”

“Skepsel sal doen wat ook al Meester verlang,” sê Skepsel en buig so laag af dat sy lippe amper aan sy knoetsrige tone raak, “want Skepsel het nie ’n keuse nie, maar Skepsel skaam hom om so ’n Meester te hê, ja –”

“Dobby sal dit doen, Harry Potter!” kry Dobby en sy oë wat so groot soos tennisballe is, swem in die trane. “Dit sal vir Dobby ’n eer wees om Harry Potter te help!”

“Noudat ek daaraan dink; dit sal goed wees om julle al twee te hê,” sê Harry. “Oukei ... Ek wil hê julle moet Draco Malfoy agtervolg.”

Harry ignoreer die uitdrukking van verrassing gemeng met ergerlikheid op Ron se gesig en gaan aan: “Ek wil weet waarheen hy gaan, wie hy ontmoet en wat hy doen. Ek wil hê julle moet hom vier-en-twintig uur van die dag agtervolg.”

“Reg, Harry Potter!” sê Dobby dadelik en sy groot oë blink van opwinding. “En as Dobby dit verkeerd doen, sal Dobby homself van die hoogste toring af gooi, Harry Potter!”

“Dit sal nie nodig wees nie,” sê Harry haastig.

“Meester wil hê ek moet die jongste Malfoy agtervolg?” vra Skepsel skor. “Meester wil hê ek moet op my gewese meesteres se suiwerbloed kleinnefie spioeneer?”

“Op hom, ja,” sê Harry terwyl hy ’n groot gevaar voorsien en besluit om dadelik ’n stokkie daarvoor te steek. “En ek verbied jou om hom te waarsku, Skepsel, of om vir hom te wys wat jy doen, of om enigsins met hom te praat, of om vir hom boodskappe te skryf, of ... of om op enige manier met hom kontak te maak. Het jy my?”

Harry kan sien hoe Skepsel sukkel om iewers ’n skuiwergat te kry in die instruksies wat hy nou net vir hom gegee het en hy wag. Ná ’n oomblik of twee, en tot sy groot verbasing, buig Skepsel weer laag en sê met bittere gekrenktheid: “Meester dink aan alles en Skepsel moet hom gehoorsaam, selfs al wil Skepsel baie eerder die Malfoy-seun se kneg wees, o ja ...”

“Dan is dit afgespreek,” sê Harry. “Ek wil gereeld terugvoer van julle hê, maar maak seker ek is nie omring deur mense wanneer julle jul opwagting maak nie. Ron en Hermione is oukei. En moet vir niemand sê wat julle doen nie. Klou net aan Malfoy vas soos twee vratpleisters.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



LORD VOLDEMORT'S REQUEST

Harry and Ron left the hospital wing first thing on Monday morning, restored to full health by the ministrations of Madam Pomfrey and now able to enjoy the benefits of having been knocked out and poisoned, the best of which was that Hermione was friends with Ron again. Hermione even escorted them down to breakfast, bringing with her the news that Ginny had argued with Dean. The drowsing creature in Harry's chest suddenly raised its head, sniffing the air hopefully.

"What did they row about?" he asked, trying to sound casual as they turned onto a seventh-floor corridor that was deserted but for a very small girl who had been examining a tapestry of trolls in tutus. She looked terrified at the sight of the approaching sixth years and

dropped the heavy brass scales she was carrying.

“It’s all right!” said Hermione kindly, hurrying forward to help her. “Here . . .”

She tapped the broken scales with her wand and said, “*Reparo.*” The girl did not say thank you, but remained rooted to the spot as they passed and watched them out of sight; Ron glanced back at her.

“I swear they’re getting smaller,” he said.

“Never mind her,” said Harry, a little impatiently. “What did Ginny and Dean row about, Hermione?”

“Oh, Dean was laughing about McLaggen hitting that Bludger at you,” said Hermione.

“It must’ve looked funny,” said Ron reasonably.

“It didn’t look funny at all!” said Hermione hotly. “It looked terrible and if Coote and Peakes hadn’t caught Harry he could have been very badly hurt!”

“Yeah, well, there was no need for Ginny and Dean to split up over it,” said Harry, still trying to sound casual. “Or are they still together?”

“Yes, they are — but why are you so interested?” asked Hermione, giving Harry a sharp look.

“I just don’t want my Quidditch team messed up again!” he said hastily, but Hermione continued to look suspicious, and he was most relieved when a voice behind them called, “Harry!” giving him an excuse to turn his back on her.

“Oh, hi, Luna.”

“I went to the hospital wing to find you,” said Luna, rummaging in her bag. “But they said you’d left. . . .”

She thrust what appeared to be a green onion, a large spotted toadstool, and a considerable amount of what looked like cat litter into Ron's hands, finally pulling out a rather grubby scroll of parchment that she handed to Harry.

“... I've been told to give you this.”

It was a small roll of parchment, which Harry recognized at once as another invitation to a lesson with Dumbledore.

“Tonight,” he told Ron and Hermione, once he had unrolled it.

“Nice commentary last match!” said Ron to Luna as she took back the green onion, the toadstool, and the cat litter. Luna smiled vaguely.

“You're making fun of me, aren't you?” she said. “Everyone says I was dreadful.”

“No, I'm serious!” said Ron earnestly. “I can't remember enjoying commentary more! What is this, by the way?” he added, holding the onionlike object up to eye level.

“Oh, it's a Gurdyroot,” she said, stuffing the cat litter and the toadstool back into her bag. “You can keep it if you like, I've got a few of them. They're really excellent for warding off Gulping Plimpies.”

And she walked away, leaving Ron chortling, still clutching the Gurdyroot.

“You know, she's grown on me, Luna,” he said, as they set off again for the Great Hall. “I know she's insane, but it's in a good —”

He stopped talking very suddenly. Lavender Brown was standing at the foot of the marble staircase looking thunderous.

“Hi,” said Ron nervously.

“C'mon,” Harry muttered to Hermione, and they sped past, though

not before they had heard Lavender say, “Why didn’t you tell me you were getting out today? And why was *she* with you?”

Ron looked both sulky and annoyed when he appeared at breakfast half an hour later, and though he sat with Lavender, Harry did not see them exchange a word all the time they were together. Hermione was acting as though she was quite oblivious to all of this, but once or twice Harry saw an inexplicable smirk cross her face. All that day she seemed to be in a particularly good mood, and that evening in the common room she even consented to look over (in other words, finish writing) Harry’s Herbology essay, something she had been resolutely refusing to do up to this point, because she had known that Harry would then let Ron copy his work.

“Thanks a lot, Hermione,” said Harry, giving her a hasty pat on the back as he checked his watch and saw that it was nearly eight o’clock. “Listen, I’ve got to hurry or I’ll be late for Dumbledore. . . .”

She did not answer, but merely crossed out a few of his feebler sentences in a weary sort of way. Grinning, Harry hurried out through the portrait hole and off to the headmaster’s office. The gargoyle leapt aside at the mention of toffee éclairs, and Harry took the spiral staircase two steps at a time, knocking on the door just as a clock within chimed eight.

“Enter,” called Dumbledore, but as Harry put out a hand to push the door, it was wrenched open from inside. There stood Professor Trelawney.

“Aha!” she cried, pointing dramatically at Harry as she blinked at him through her magnifying spectacles. “So this is the reason I am to

be thrown unceremoniously from your office, Dumbledore!”

“My dear Sybill,” said Dumbledore in a slightly exasperated voice, “there is no question of throwing you unceremoniously from anywhere, but Harry does have an appointment, and I really don’t think there is any more to be said —”

“Very well,” said Professor Trelawney, in a deeply wounded voice. “If you will not banish the usurping nag, so be it. . . . Perhaps I shall find a school where my talents are better appreciated. . . .”

She pushed past Harry and disappeared down the spiral staircase; they heard her stumble halfway down, and Harry guessed that she had tripped over one of her trailing shawls.

“Please close the door and sit down, Harry,” said Dumbledore, sounding rather tired.

Harry obeyed, noticing as he took his usual seat in front of Dumbledore’s desk that the Pensieve lay between them once more, as did two more tiny crystal bottles full of swirling memory.

“Professor Trelawney still isn’t happy Firenze is teaching, then?” Harry asked.

“No,” said Dumbledore, “Divination is turning out to be much more trouble than I could have foreseen, never having studied the subject myself. I cannot ask Firenze to return to the forest, where he is now an outcast, nor can I ask Sybill Trelawney to leave. Between ourselves, she has no idea of the danger she would be in outside the castle. She does not know — and I think it would be unwise to enlighten her — that she made the prophecy about you and Voldemort, you see.”

Dumbledore heaved a deep sigh, then said, “But never mind my

staffing problems. We have much more important matters to discuss. Firstly — have you managed the task I set you at the end of our previous lesson?”

“Ah,” said Harry, brought up short. What with Apparition lessons and Quidditch and Ron being poisoned and getting his skull cracked and his determination to find out what Draco Malfoy was up to, Harry had almost forgotten about the memory Dumbledore had asked him to extract from Professor Slughorn. “Well, I asked Professor Slughorn about it at the end of Potions, sir, but, er, he wouldn’t give it to me.”

There was a little silence.

“I see,” said Dumbledore eventually, peering at Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles and giving Harry the usual sensation that he was being X-rayed. “And you feel that you have exerted your very best efforts in this matter, do you? That you have exercised all of your considerable ingenuity? That you have left no depth of cunning unplumbed in your quest to retrieve the memory?”

“Well,” Harry stalled, at a loss for what to say next. His single attempt to get hold of the memory suddenly seemed embarrassingly feeble. “Well . . . the day Ron swallowed love potion by mistake I took him to Professor Slughorn. I thought maybe if I got Professor Slughorn in a good enough mood —”

“And did that work?” asked Dumbledore.

“Well, no, sir, because Ron got poisoned —”

“— which, naturally, made you forget all about trying to retrieve the memory; I would have expected nothing else, while your best friend was in danger. Once it became clear that Mr. Weasley was

going to make a full recovery, however, I would have hoped that you returned to the task I set you. I thought I made it clear to you how very important that memory is. Indeed, I did my best to impress upon you that it is the most crucial memory of all and that we will be wasting our time without it.”

A hot, prickly feeling of shame spread from the top of Harry’s head all the way down his body. Dumbledore had not raised his voice, he did not even sound angry, but Harry would have preferred him to yell; this cold disappointment was worse than anything.

“Sir,” he said, a little desperately, “it isn’t that I wasn’t bothered or anything, I’ve just had other — other things . . .”

“Other things on your mind,” Dumbledore finished the sentence for him. “I see.”

Silence fell between them again, the most uncomfortable silence Harry had ever experienced with Dumbledore; it seemed to go on and on, punctuated only by the little grunting snores of the portrait of Armando Dippet over Dumbledore’s head. Harry felt strangely diminished, as though he had shrunk a little since he had entered the room. When he could stand it no longer he said, “Professor Dumbledore, I’m really sorry. I should have done more. . . . I should have realized you wouldn’t have asked me to do it if it wasn’t really important.”

“Thank you for saying that, Harry,” said Dumbledore quietly. “May I hope, then, that you will give this matter higher priority from now on? There will be little point in our meeting after tonight unless we have that memory.”

“I’ll do it, sir, I’ll get it from him,” he said earnestly.

“Then we shall say no more about it just now,” said Dumbledore more kindly, “but continue with our story where we left off. You remember where that was?”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry quickly. “Voldemort killed his father and his grandparents and made it look as though his Uncle Morfin did it. Then he went back to Hogwarts and he asked . . . he asked Professor Slughorn about Horcruxes,” he mumbled shamefacedly.

“Very good,” said Dumbledore. “Now, you will remember, I hope, that I told you at the very outset of these meetings of ours that we would be entering the realms of guesswork and speculation?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thus far, as I hope you agree, I have shown you reasonably firm sources of fact for my deductions as to what Voldemort did until the age of seventeen?”

Harry nodded.

“But now, Harry,” said Dumbledore, “now things become murkier and stranger. If it was difficult to find evidence about the boy Riddle, it has been almost impossible to find anyone prepared to reminisce about the man Voldemort. In fact, I doubt whether there is a soul alive, apart from himself, who could give us a full account of his life since he left Hogwarts. However, I have two last memories that I would like to share with you.” Dumbledore indicated the two little crystal bottles gleaming beside the Pensieve. “I shall then be glad of your opinion as to whether the conclusions I have drawn from them seem likely.”

The idea that Dumbledore valued his opinion this highly made Harry feel even more deeply ashamed that he had failed in the task of

retrieving the Horcrux memory, and he shifted guiltily in his seat as Dumbledore raised the first of the two bottles to the light and examined it.

“I hope you are not tired of diving into other people’s memories, for they are curious recollections, these two,” he said. “This first one came from a very old house-elf by the name of Hokey. Before we see what Hokey witnessed, I must quickly recount how Lord Voldemort left Hogwarts.

“He reached the seventh year of his schooling with, as you might have expected, top grades in every examination he had taken. All around him, his classmates were deciding which jobs they were to pursue once they had left Hogwarts. Nearly everybody expected spectacular things from Tom Riddle, prefect, Head Boy, winner of the Award for Special Services to the School. I know that several teachers, Professor Slughorn amongst them, suggested that he join the Ministry of Magic, offered to set up appointments, put him in touch with useful contacts. He refused all offers. The next thing the staff knew, Voldemort was working at Borgin and Burkes.”

“At Borgin and Burkes?” Harry repeated, stunned.

“At Borgin and Burkes,” repeated Dumbledore calmly. “I think you will see what attractions the place held for him when we have entered Hokey’s memory. But this was not Voldemort’s first choice of job. Hardly anyone knew of it at the time — I was one of the few in whom the then headmaster confided — but Voldemort first approached Professor Dippet and asked whether he could remain at Hogwarts as a teacher.”

“He wanted to stay here? Why?” asked Harry, more amazed still.

“I believe he had several reasons, though he confided none of them to Professor Dippet,” said Dumbledore. “Firstly, and very importantly, Voldemort was, I believe, more attached to this school than he has ever been to a person. Hogwarts was where he had been happiest; the first and only place he had felt at home.”

Harry felt slightly uncomfortable at these words, for this was exactly how he felt about Hogwarts too.

“Secondly, the castle is a stronghold of ancient magic. Undoubtedly Voldemort had penetrated many more of its secrets than most of the students who pass through the place, but he may have felt that there were still mysteries to unravel, stores of magic to tap.

“And thirdly, as a teacher, he would have had great power and influence over young witches and wizards. Perhaps he had gained the idea from Professor Slughorn, the teacher with whom he was on best terms, who had demonstrated how influential a role a teacher can play. I do not imagine for an instant that Voldemort envisaged spending the rest of his life at Hogwarts, but I do think that he saw it as a useful recruiting ground, and a place where he might begin to build himself an army.”

“But he didn’t get the job, sir?”

“No, he did not. Professor Dippet told him that he was too young at eighteen, but invited him to reapply in a few years, if he still wished to teach.”

“How did you feel about that, sir?” asked Harry hesitantly.

“Deeply uneasy,” said Dumbledore. “I had advised Armando against the appointment — I did not give the reasons I have given you, for Professor Dippet was very fond of Voldemort and convinced

of his honesty. But I did not want Lord Voldemort back at this school, and especially not in a position of power.”

“Which job did he want, sir? What subject did he want to teach?”

Somehow, Harry knew the answer even before Dumbledore gave it.

“Defense Against the Dark Arts. It was being taught at the time by an old professor by the name of Galatea Merrythought, who had been at Hogwarts for nearly fifty years.

“So Voldemort went off to Borgin and Burkes, and all the staff who had admired him said what a waste it was, a brilliant young wizard like that, working in a shop. However, Voldemort was no mere assistant. Polite and handsome and clever, he was soon given particular jobs of the type that only exist in a place like Borgin and Burkes, which specializes, as you know, Harry, in objects with unusual and powerful properties. Voldemort was sent to persuade people to part with their treasures for sale by the partners, and he was, by all accounts, unusually gifted at doing this.”

“I’ll bet he was,” said Harry, unable to contain himself.

“Well, quite,” said Dumbledore, with a faint smile. “And now it is time to hear from Hokey the house-elf, who worked for a very old, very rich witch by the name of Hepzibah Smith.”

Dumbledore tapped a bottle with his wand, the cork flew out, and he tipped the swirling memory into the Pensieve, saying as he did so, “After you, Harry.”

Harry got to his feet and bent once more over the rippling silver contents of the stone basin until his face touched them. He tumbled through dark nothingness and landed in a sitting room in front of an

immensely fat old lady wearing an elaborate ginger wig and a brilliant pink set of robes that flowed all around her, giving her the look of a melting iced cake. She was looking into a small jeweled mirror and dabbing rouge onto her already scarlet cheeks with a large powder puff, while the tiniest and oldest house-elf Harry had ever seen laced her fleshy feet into tight satin slippers.

“Hurry up, Hokey!” said Hepzibah imperiously. “He said he’d come at four, it’s only a couple of minutes to and he’s never been late yet!”

She tucked away her powder puff as the house-elf straightened up. The top of the elf’s head barely reached the seat of Hepzibah’s chair, and her papery skin hung off her frame just like the crisp linen sheet she wore draped like a toga.

“How do I look?” said Hepzibah, turning her head to admire the various angles of her face in the mirror.

“Lovely, madam,” squeaked Hokey.

Harry could only assume that it was down in Hokey’s contract that she must lie through her teeth when asked this question, because Hepzibah Smith looked a long way from lovely in his opinion.

A tinkling doorbell rang and both mistress and elf jumped.

“Quick, quick, he’s here, Hokey!” cried Hepzibah and the elf scurried out of the room, which was so crammed with objects that it was difficult to see how anybody could navigate their way across it without knocking over at least a dozen things: There were cabinets full of little lacquered boxes, cases full of gold-embossed books, shelves of orbs and celestial globes, and many flourishing potted plants in brass containers. In fact, the room looked like a cross

between a magical antique shop and a conservatory.

The house-elf returned within minutes, followed by a tall young man Harry had no difficulty whatsoever in recognizing as Voldemort. He was plainly dressed in a black suit; his hair was a little longer than it had been at school and his cheeks were hollowed, but all of this suited him; he looked more handsome than ever. He picked his way through the cramped room with an air that showed he had visited many times before and bowed low over Hepzibah's fat little hand, brushing it with his lips.

"I brought you flowers," he said quietly, producing a bunch of roses from nowhere.

"You naughty boy, you shouldn't have!" squealed old Hepzibah, though Harry noticed that she had an empty vase standing ready on the nearest little table. "You do spoil this old lady, Tom. . . . Sit down, sit down. . . . Where's Hokey? Ah. . . ."

The house-elf had come dashing back into the room carrying a tray of little cakes, which she set at her mistress's elbow.

"Help yourself, Tom," said Hepzibah, "I know how you love my cakes. Now, how are you? You look pale. They overwork you at that shop, I've said it a hundred times. . . ."

Voldemort smiled mechanically and Hepzibah simpered.

"Well, what's your excuse for visiting this time?" she asked, batting her lashes.

"Mr. Burke would like to make an improved offer for the goblin-made armor," said Voldemort. "Five hundred Galleons, he feels it is a more than fair —"

"Now, now, not so fast, or I'll think you're only here for my

trinkets!” pouted Hepzibah.

“I am ordered here because of them,” said Voldemort quietly. “I am only a poor assistant, madam, who must do as he is told. Mr. Burke wishes me to inquire —”

“Oh, Mr. Burke, phooey!” said Hepzibah, waving a little hand. “I’ve something to show you that I’ve never shown Mr. Burke! Can you keep a secret, Tom? Will you promise you won’t tell Mr. Burke I’ve got it? He’d never let me rest if he knew I’d shown it to you, and I’m not selling, not to Burke, not to anyone! But you, Tom, you’ll appreciate it for its history, not how many Galleons you can get for it.”

“I’d be glad to see anything Miss Hepzibah shows me,” said Voldemort quietly, and Hepzibah gave another girlish giggle.

“I had Hokey bring it out for me. . . . Hokey, where are you? I want to show Mr. Riddle our *finest* treasure. . . . In fact, bring both, while you’re at it. . . .”

“Here, madam,” squeaked the house-elf, and Harry saw two leather boxes, one on top of the other, moving across the room as if of their own volition, though he knew the tiny elf was holding them over her head as she wended her way between tables, pouffes, and footstools.

“Now,” said Hepzibah happily, taking the boxes from the elf, laying them in her lap, and preparing to open the topmost one, “I think you’ll like this, Tom. . . . Oh, if my family knew I was showing you. . . . They can’t wait to get their hands on this!”

She opened the lid. Harry edged forward a little to get a better view and saw what looked like a small golden cup with two finely

wrought handles.

“I wonder whether you know what it is, Tom? Pick it up, have a good look!” whispered Hepzibah, and Voldemort stretched out a long-fingered hand and lifted the cup by one handle out of its snug silken wrappings. Harry thought he saw a red gleam in his dark eyes. His greedy expression was curiously mirrored on Hepzibah’s face, except that her tiny eyes were fixed upon Voldemort’s handsome features.

“A badger,” murmured Voldemort, examining the engraving upon the cup. “Then this was . . . ?”

“Helga Hufflepuff’s, as you very well know, you clever boy!” said Hepzibah, leaning forward with a loud creaking of corsets and actually pinching his hollow cheek. “Didn’t I tell you I was distantly descended? This has been handed down in the family for years and years. Lovely, isn’t it? And all sorts of powers it’s supposed to possess too, but I haven’t tested them thoroughly, I just keep it nice and safe in here. . . .”

She hooked the cup back off Voldemort’s long forefinger and restored it gently to its box, too intent upon settling it carefully back into position to notice the shadow that crossed Voldemort’s face as the cup was taken away.

“Now then,” said Hepzibah happily, “where’s Hokey? Oh yes, there you are — take that away now, Hokey.”

The elf obediently took the boxed cup, and Hepzibah turned her attention to the much flatter box in her lap.

“I think you’ll like this even more, Tom,” she whispered. “Lean in a little, dear boy, so you can see. . . . Of course, Burke knows I’ve

got this one, I bought it from him, and I daresay he'd love to get it back when I'm gone. . . ."

She slid back the fine filigree clasp and flipped open the box. There upon the smooth crimson velvet lay a heavy golden locket.

Voldemort reached out his hand, without invitation this time, and held it up to the light, staring at it.

"Slytherin's mark," he said quietly, as the light played upon an ornate, serpentine S.

"That's right!" said Hepzibah, delighted, apparently, at the sight of Voldemort gazing at her locket, transfixed. "I had to pay an arm and a leg for it, but I couldn't let it pass, not a real treasure like that, had to have it for my collection. Burke bought it, apparently, from a ragged-looking woman who seemed to have stolen it, but had no idea of its true value —"

There was no mistaking it this time: Voldemort's eyes flashed scarlet at the words, and Harry saw his knuckles whiten on the locket's chain.

"— I daresay Burke paid her a pittance but there you are. . . . Pretty, isn't it? And again, all kinds of powers attributed to it, though I just keep it nice and safe. . . ."

She reached out to take the locket back. For a moment, Harry thought Voldemort was not going to let go of it, but then it had slid through his fingers and was back in its red velvet cushion.

"So there you are, Tom, dear, and I hope you enjoyed that!"

She looked him full in the face and for the first time, Harry saw her foolish smile falter.

"Are you all right, dear?"

“Oh yes,” said Voldemort quietly. “Yes, I’m very well. . . .”

“I thought — but a trick of the light, I suppose —” said Hepzibah, looking unnerved, and Harry guessed that she too had seen the momentary red gleam in Voldemort’s eyes. “Here, Hokey, take these away and lock them up again. . . . The usual enchantments . . .”

“Time to leave, Harry,” said Dumbledore quietly, and as the little elf bobbed away bearing the boxes, Dumbledore grasped Harry once again above the elbow and together they rose up through oblivion and back to Dumbledore’s office.

“Hepzibah Smith died two days after that little scene,” said Dumbledore, resuming his seat and indicating that Harry should do the same. “Hokey the house-elf was convicted by the Ministry of poisoning her mistress’s evening cocoa by accident.”

“No way!” said Harry angrily.

“I see we are of one mind,” said Dumbledore. “Certainly, there are many similarities between this death and that of the Riddles. In both cases, somebody else took the blame, someone who had a clear memory of having caused the death —”

“Hokey confessed?”

“She remembered putting something in her mistress’s cocoa that turned out not to be sugar, but a lethal and little-known poison,” said Dumbledore. “It was concluded that she had not meant to do it, but being old and confused —”

“Voldemort modified her memory, just like he did with Morfin!”

“Yes, that is my conclusion too,” said Dumbledore. “And, just as with Morfin, the Ministry was predisposed to suspect Hokey —”

“— because she was a house-elf,” said Harry. He had rarely felt

more in sympathy with the society Hermione had set up, S.P.E.W.

“Precisely,” said Dumbledore. “She was old, she admitted to having tampered with the drink, and nobody at the Ministry bothered to inquire further. As in the case of Morfin, by the time I traced her and managed to extract this memory, her life was almost over — but her memory, of course, proves nothing except that Voldemort knew of the existence of the cup and the locket.

“By the time Hokey was convicted, Hepzibah’s family had realized that two of her greatest treasures were missing. It took them a while to be sure of this, for she had many hiding places, having always guarded her collection most jealously. But before they were sure beyond doubt that the cup and the locket were both gone, the assistant who had worked at Borgin and Burkes, the young man who had visited Hepzibah so regularly and charmed her so well, had resigned his post and vanished. His superiors had no idea where he had gone; they were as surprised as anyone at his disappearance. And that was the last that was seen or heard of Tom Riddle for a very long time.

“Now,” said Dumbledore, “if you don’t mind, Harry, I want to pause once more to draw your attention to certain points of our story. Voldemort had committed another murder; whether it was his first since he killed the Riddles, I do not know, but I think it was. This time, as you will have seen, he killed not for revenge, but for gain. He wanted the two fabulous trophies that poor, besotted, old woman showed him. Just as he had once robbed the other children at his orphanage, just as he had stolen his Uncle Morfin’s ring, so he ran off now with Hepzibah’s cup and locket.”

“But,” said Harry, frowning, “it seems mad. . . . Risking everything, throwing away his job, just for those . . .”

“Mad to you, perhaps, but not to Voldemort,” said Dumbledore. “I hope you will understand in due course exactly what those objects meant to him, Harry, but you must admit that it is not difficult to imagine that he saw the locket, at least, as rightfully his.”

“The locket maybe,” said Harry, “but why take the cup as well?”

“It had belonged to another of Hogwarts’s founders,” said Dumbledore. “I think he still felt a great pull toward the school and that he could not resist an object so steeped in Hogwarts history. There were other reasons, I think. . . . I hope to be able to demonstrate them to you in due course.

“And now for the very last recollection I have to show you, at least until you manage to retrieve Professor Slughorn’s memory for us. Ten years separate Hokey’s memory and this one, ten years during which we can only guess at what Lord Voldemort was doing. . . .”

Harry got to his feet once more as Dumbledore emptied the last memory into the Pensieve.

“Whose memory is it?” he asked.

“Mine,” said Dumbledore.

And Harry dived after Dumbledore through the shifting silver mass, landing in the very office he had just left. There was Fawkes slumbering happily on his perch, and there behind the desk was Dumbledore, who looked very similar to the Dumbledore standing beside Harry, though both hands were whole and undamaged and his face was, perhaps, a little less lined. The one difference between the present-day office and this one was that it was snowing in the past;

bluish flecks were drifting past the window in the dark and building up on the outside ledge.

The younger Dumbledore seemed to be waiting for something, and sure enough, moments after their arrival, there was a knock on the door and he said, "Enter."

Harry let out a hastily stifled gasp. Voldemort had entered the room. His features were not those Harry had seen emerge from the great stone cauldron almost two years ago: They were not as snakelike, the eyes were not yet scarlet, the face not yet masklike, and yet he was no longer handsome Tom Riddle. It was as though his features had been burned and blurred; they were waxy and oddly distorted, and the whites of the eyes now had a permanently bloody look, though the pupils were not yet the slits that Harry knew they would become. He was wearing a long black cloak, and his face was as pale as the snow glistening on his shoulders.

The Dumbledore behind the desk showed no sign of surprise. Evidently this visit had been made by appointment.

"Good evening, Tom," said Dumbledore easily. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you," said Voldemort, and he took the seat to which Dumbledore had gestured — the very seat, by the looks of it, that Harry had just vacated in the present. "I heard that you had become headmaster," he said, and his voice was slightly higher and colder than it had been. "A worthy choice."

"I am glad you approve," said Dumbledore, smiling. "May I offer you a drink?"

"That would be welcome," said Voldemort. "I have come a long

way.”

Dumbledore stood and swept over to the cabinet where he now kept the Pensieve, but which then was full of bottles. Having handed Voldemort a goblet of wine and poured one for himself, he returned to the seat behind his desk.

“So, Tom . . . to what do I owe the pleasure?”

Voldemort did not answer at once, but merely sipped his wine.

“They do not call me ‘Tom’ anymore,” he said. “These days, I am known as —”

“I know what you are known as,” said Dumbledore, smiling pleasantly. “But to me, I’m afraid, you will always be Tom Riddle. It is one of the irritating things about old teachers. I am afraid that they never quite forget their charges’ youthful beginnings.”

He raised his glass as though toasting Voldemort, whose face remained expressionless. Nevertheless, Harry felt the atmosphere in the room change subtly: Dumbledore’s refusal to use Voldemort’s chosen name was a refusal to allow Voldemort to dictate the terms of the meeting, and Harry could tell that Voldemort took it as such.

“I am surprised you have remained here so long,” said Voldemort after a short pause. “I always wondered why a wizard such as yourself never wished to leave school.”

“Well,” said Dumbledore, still smiling, “to a wizard such as myself, there can be nothing more important than passing on ancient skills, helping hone young minds. If I remember correctly, you once saw the attraction of teaching too.”

“I see it still,” said Voldemort. “I merely wondered why you — who are so often asked for advice by the Ministry, and who have

twice, I think, been offered the post of Minister —”

“Three times at the last count, actually,” said Dumbledore. “But the Ministry never attracted me as a career. Again, something we have in common, I think.”

Voldemort inclined his head, unsmiling, and took another sip of wine. Dumbledore did not break the silence that stretched between them now, but waited, with a look of pleasant expectancy, for Voldemort to talk first.

“I have returned,” he said, after a little while, “later, perhaps, than Professor Dippet expected . . . but I have returned, nevertheless, to request again what he once told me I was too young to have. I have come to you to ask that you permit me to return to this castle, to teach. I think you must know that I have seen and done much since I left this place. I could show and tell your students things they can gain from no other wizard.”

Dumbledore considered Voldemort over the top of his own goblet for a while before speaking.

“Yes, I certainly do know that you have seen and done much since leaving us,” he said quietly. “Rumors of your doings have reached your old school, Tom. I should be sorry to believe half of them.”

Voldemort’s expression remained impassive as he said, “Greatness inspires envy, envy engenders spite, spite spawns lies. You must know this, Dumbledore.”

“You call it ‘greatness,’ what you have been doing, do you?” asked Dumbledore delicately.

“Certainly,” said Voldemort, and his eyes seemed to burn red. “I have experimented; I have pushed the boundaries of magic further,

perhaps, than they have ever been pushed —”

“Of some kinds of magic,” Dumbledore corrected him quietly. “Of some. Of others, you remain . . . forgive me . . . woefully ignorant.”

For the first time, Voldemort smiled. It was a taut leer, an evil thing, more threatening than a look of rage.

“The old argument,” he said softly. “But nothing I have seen in the world has supported your famous pronouncements that love is more powerful than my kind of magic, Dumbledore.”

“Perhaps you have been looking in the wrong places,” suggested Dumbledore.

“Well, then, what better place to start my fresh researches than here, at Hogwarts?” said Voldemort. “Will you let me return? Will you let me share my knowledge with your students? I place myself and my talents at your disposal. I am yours to command.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “And what will become of those whom *you* command? What will happen to those who call themselves — or so rumor has it — the Death Eaters?”

Harry could tell that Voldemort had not expected Dumbledore to know this name; he saw Voldemort’s eyes flash red again and the slitlike nostrils flare.

“My friends,” he said, after a moment’s pause, “will carry on without me, I am sure.”

“I am glad to hear that you consider them friends,” said Dumbledore. “I was under the impression that they are more in the order of servants.”

“You are mistaken,” said Voldemort.

“Then if I were to go to the Hog’s Head tonight, I would not find a

group of them — Nott, Rosier, Mulciber, Dolohov — awaiting your return? Devoted friends indeed, to travel this far with you on a snowy night, merely to wish you luck as you attempted to secure a teaching post.”

There could be no doubt that Dumbledore’s detailed knowledge of those with whom he was traveling was even less welcome to Voldemort; however, he rallied almost at once.

“You are omniscient as ever, Dumbledore.”

“Oh no, merely friendly with the local barmen,” said Dumbledore lightly. “Now, Tom . . .”

Dumbledore set down his empty glass and drew himself up in his seat, the tips of his fingers together in a very characteristic gesture.

“Let us speak openly. Why have you come here tonight, surrounded by henchmen, to request a job we both know you do not want?”

Voldemort looked coldly surprised. “A job I do not want? On the contrary, Dumbledore, I want it very much.”

“Oh, you want to come back to Hogwarts, but you do not want to teach any more than you wanted to when you were eighteen. What is it you’re after, Tom? Why not try an open request for once?”

Voldemort sneered. “If you do not want to give me a job —”

“Of course I don’t,” said Dumbledore. “And I don’t think for a moment you expected me to. Nevertheless, you came here, you asked, you must have had a purpose.”

Voldemort stood up. He looked less like Tom Riddle than ever, his features thick with rage. “This is your final word?”

“It is,” said Dumbledore, also standing.

“Then we have nothing more to say to each other.”

“No, nothing,” said Dumbledore, and a great sadness filled his face. “The time is long gone when I could frighten you with a burning wardrobe and force you to make repayment for your crimes. But I wish I could, Tom. . . . I wish I could. . . .”

For a second, Harry was on the verge of shouting a pointless warning: He was sure that Voldemort’s hand had twitched toward his pocket and his wand; but then the moment had passed, Voldemort had turned away, the door was closing, and he was gone.

Harry felt Dumbledore’s hand close over his arm again and moments later, they were standing together on almost the same spot, but there was no snow building on the window ledge, and Dumbledore’s hand was blackened and dead-looking once more.

“Why?” said Harry at once, looking up into Dumbledore’s face. “Why did he come back? Did you ever find out?”

“I have ideas,” said Dumbledore, “but no more than that.”

“What ideas, sir?”

“I shall tell you, Harry, when you have retrieved that memory from Professor Slughorn,” said Dumbledore. “When you have that last piece of the jigsaw, everything will, I hope, be clear . . . to both of us.”

Harry was still burning with curiosity and even though Dumbledore had walked to the door and was holding it open for him, he did not move at once.

“Was he after the Defense Against the Dark Arts job again, sir? He didn’t say. . . .”

“Oh, he definitely wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job,” said Dumbledore. “The aftermath of our little meeting proved that.

You see, we have never been able to keep a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher for longer than a year since I refused the post to Lord Voldemort.”

Die Heer Voldemort se Versoek

Harry en Ron word vroeg die Maandagoggend uit die siekeboeg ontslaan. Danksy Madame Pomfrey se verpleging is hulle perdfris en gesond en nou kan hulle die voordele verbonde aan 'n uitklophou en vergiftiging geniet; die grootste hiervan is dat Hermione weer vriende met Ron is. Hermione loop selfs saam met hulle af ontbyt toe en vertel dat Ginny met Dean gestry het. Die sluimerende monster in Harry se borskas lig skielik sy kop en snuif hoopvol in die lug.

“Waaroor het hulle vasgesit?” vra hy en probeer ongeërg klink terwyl hulle indraai by een van die sewende verdieping se gange wat verlate is afgesien van 'n baie klein meisietjie wat 'n tapisserie van trolle in balletrokke staan en bekyk. Sy lyk angsbevange toe sy die sesdejaars sien en laat val die swaar bronsskaal wat sy by haar het.

“Dis oukei!” sê Hermione vriendelik en kom haar dadelik help. “Hier ...” Sy tik met haar towerstaf teen die skaal en sê: “*Reparo*.”

Die meisie sê nie dankie nie, maar bly op die plek vasgenael en staar hulle agterna terwyl hulle verbystap; Ron kyk om na haar.

“Ek sweer hulle raak kleiner,” sê hy.

“Vergeet van haar,” sê Harry effens ongeduldig. “Waaroor het Ginny en Dean gestry, Hermione?”

“O, Dean het gelag oor McLaggen jou met die knuppel gemoker het,” sê Hermione.

“Dit moet snaaks gelyk het,” se Ron redelik.

“Dit was glad nie snaaks nie!” sê Hermione vies. “Dit was aaklig; as Coote en Peakes Harry nie gevang het nie, sou hy baie seergekry het!”

“Ja, wel, dis nie 'n rede vir Ginny en Dean om mekaar te los nie,” sê Harry en probeer nog steeds ongeërg klink. “Of is hulle nog bymekaar?”

“Ja, hulle is – maar hoekom stel jy so belang?” vra Hermione en kyk Harry skerp aan.

“Ek wil net nie hê my Kwiddiekspan moet weer opgemors word nie!” sê hy haastig, maar Hermione lyk nog steeds agterdogtig en hy is baie verlig toe ’n stem agter hulle “Harry!” roep en hom ’n verskoning gee om sy rug op haar te draai.

“O haai, Luna.”

“Ek is siekeboeg toe om vir jou te gaan kuier,” sê sy en krap in haar sak rond. “Maar toe sê hulle jy’s al weg ...”

Sy druk goed wat soos ’n groen ui, ’n groot paddastoel met kolle op en ’n aansienlike hoeveelheid katsand lyk in Ron se hande en kry uiteindelik ’n taamlike vuil perkamentrol wat sy vir Harry gee.

“... Ek is gevra om dit vir jou te gee.”

Harry herken die klein stukkie perkamentrol dadelik as nog ’n uitnodiging na ’n les by Dumbledore.

“Vanaand,” sê hy vir Ron en Hermione nadat hy dit oopgerol het.

“Cool wedstrydkommentaar van jou!” sê Ron vir Luna terwyl sy die groen ui, paddastoel en katsand terugvat. Luna glimlag vaag.

“Jy spot met my, nè?” sê sy. “Almal sê ek was afgrysig.”

“Nee, ek’s ernstig!” sê Ron ernstig. “Ek kan nie onthou dat ek enigiemand se kommentaar al só geniet het nie! Terloops, wat is dit?” vra hy en hou die ui-agtige voorwerp voor haar oë.

“O, dis ’n Goerdiewortel,” sê sy en sit die katsand en paddastoel terug in haar sak. “Jy kan dit kry as jy dit wil hê; ek het ’n paar daarvan. Dis uitstekend om Slukkende Plimpies mee te verwilder.”

En sy stap weg terwyl Ron die Goerdiewortel in sy hand grinnikend bekyk.

“Julle weet; daai Luna het op my gegroei,” sê hy terwyl hulle weer na die Groot Saal toe aanstap. “Ek weet sy’s getik, maar op ’n goeie –”

Hy hou ewe skielik op met praat. Lavender Brown staan aan die voet van die marmertrap en lyk rasend van woede.

“Haai,” sê Ron senuagtig.

“Komaan,” mompel Harry vir Hermione en hulle loop vinnig verder, maar hoor hoe Lavender sê: “Hoekom het jy nie vir my gesê jy kom vandag uit nie? En hoekom is sy by jou?”

Ron lyk suur en geïrriteerd toe hy ’n halfuur later vir ontbyt opdaag, en al sit hy by Lavender kom Harry agter dat hulle die hele tyd nie ’n enkele woord met mekaar praat nie. Hermione tree op asof sy totaal onbewus van dit alles is, maar Harry sien een of twee keer ’n onverklaarbare laggie op haar gesig. Sy is die hele dag in ’n besonder goeie bui en daardie aand in die geselskamer is sy selfs bereid om Harry se Kruiékunde-opstel deur te kyk (met ander

woorde, klaar te skryf); iets wat sy die afgelope tyd botweg geweier het om te doen omdat sy geweet het Harry sal Ron dan toelaat om sy werk af te skryf.

“Baie dankie, Hermione,” sê Harry en klop haar haastig op die rug terwyl hy op sy horlosie kyk en sien dit is amper agtuur. “Luister, ek moet gou maak, of ek is laat vir Dumbledore ...”

Sy antwoord hom nie, maar trek net ’n paar van sy swakker sinne half moeg dood. Harry klim met ’n grinnik deur die portret-opening en loop tot by Dumbledore se kantoor. Die drakekop spring opsy toe Harry koffie-éclairs noem; hy hardloop die spiraaltrappies twee-twee op en klop net mooi aan die deur toe die horlosie binne agt slae slaan.

“Binne,” roep Dumbledore, maar toe Harry sy hand uitsteek om die deur oop te stoot, word dit van binne af oopgepluk. Professor Trelawney staan daar.

“Aha!” roep sy uit en wys dramaties na Harry terwyl sy haar oë agter haar vergrootglasbril knip. “So dis die rede hoekom ek so sonder omhaal by jou kantoor uitgegooi word, Dumbledore!”

“My liewe Sybill,” sê Dumbledore in ’n effens omgekrapte stem, “ek gooi jou hoegenaamd nie sonder omhaal uit nie, maar Harry het ’n afspraak en ek dink werklik nie daar is enigiets meer om te sê –”

“Goed dan,” sê professor Trelawney in ’n diep, seergemaakte stem. “As jy die aanmatigende ou perd nie die deur wil wys nie, laat dit so wees ... Miskien sal ek ’n ander skool vind waar my talente na waarde geskat word ...”

Sy druk verby Harry en verdwyn met die spiraaltrap af; hulle hoor haar halfpad na onder struikel en Harry raai dat sy oor een van haar slepende tjalies geval het.

“Maak asseblief die deur toe en kom sit, Harry,” sê Dumbledore, wat nogal moeg klink.

Harry maak so en toe hy op die gewone stoel voor Dumbledore se lessenaar kom sit, sien hy die Peinssif staan weer eens tussen hulle, en so ook twee ander kristalbotteltjies waarin daar herinneringe rondmaal.

“Is professor Trelawney nog steeds ongelukkig omdat Firenze hier skoolhou?” vra Harry.

“Ja,” sê Dumbledore. “Voorspellings veroorsaak baie meer moeilikheid as wat ek voorsien het, aangesien ek die vak nooit self bestudeer het nie. Ek kan Firenze nie vra om terug Woud toe te gaan nie, want hy is nou ’n uitgeworpene daar, maar ek kan Sybill Trelawney ook nie vra om die skool te verlaat nie. Tussen ons, sy het nie ’n benul van die gevaar waarin sy buite die skool sal verkeer nie.

Sien jy, sy weet nie – en ek dink dit sal onwys wees om haar daaroor in te lig – dat dit sy was wat die profesie oor jou en Voldemort uitgespreek het.”

Dumbledore sug diep en sê dan: “Maar kom ons vergeet van my probleme met die personeel. Ons het baie belangriker sake om te bespreek. Eerstens – kon jy die taak wat ek jou aan die einde van ons vorige les gegee het, voltooi?”

“E,” sê Harry en bly dan stil. Te midde van Appareringslesse en Kwiddiek en Ron wat vergiftig is en sy skedel wat gekraak is en sy vasberadenheid om uit te vind wat Draco Malfoy in die mou voer, het Harry amper vergeet van die herinnering wat Dumbledore hom gevra het om by professor Slughorn te kry ... “Wel, ek het professor Slughorn aan die einde van Towerdrankies daarvoor gevra, professor, maar hy wou dit nie vir my gee nie.”

Daar is vir 'n oomblik stilte.

“Ek sien,” sê Dumbledore dan en bekijk Harry oor sy halfmaanbril; dit voel vir Harry of Dumbledore X-strale van hom neem. “En voel jy jy het jou uiterste bes gedoen sover dit hierdie saak aangaan? Het jy al jou aansienlike vindingrykheid aan die dag gelê? Het jy alle dieptes van sluheid deurgrond in jou poging om daardie herinnering te bekom?”

“Wel,” probeer Harry tyd wen, want hy weet nie wat om volgende te sê nie. Hy voel skielik verleë omdat sy enigste poging om die herinnering te kry, so flou was. “Wel ... die dag toe Ron die liefdesdrankie per ongeluk ingekry het, het ek hom na professor Slughorn toe geneem. Ek het gedink ek kan die professor dalk in 'n goeie bui kry en dan –”

“En het dit gewerk?” vra Dumbledore.

“Wel, nee, professor, want Ron is vergiftig –”

“– wat jou natuurlik heeltemal van jou soeke na die herinnering laat vergeet het; wat te verstane is, want jou beste vriend was in lewensgevaar. Maar toe dit duidelik word dat meneer Weasley ten volle sou herstel, sou ek hoop jy sou jou weer toespits op die taak wat ek vir jou gegee het. Ek dog ek het dit vir jou duidelik gemaak hoe uiters belangrik daardie herinnering is. Ek het my bes gedoen om te beklemtoon dat daardie herinnering die heel belangrikste een van almal is en dat ons ons tyd daarsonder sal mors.”

'n Warm, stekelrige gevoel van skaamte pak Harry beet; dit versprei van sy kop af dwarsdeur sy hele liggaam. Dumbledore het nie sy stem verhef nie, hy het nie eens kwaad geklink nie, maar Harry wens hy het eerder op hom geskree; hierdie koue teleurstelling is erger as enigiets anders.

“Professor,” sê hy ietwat desperaat, “dis nie dat ek my nie daaraan gesteur het nie of iets. Daar was net baie ander – ander dinge ...”

“Ander dinge in jou gedagtes,” maak Dumbledore die sin vir hom klaar. “Ek sien.”

Daar kom weer ’n stilte tussen hulle; die ongemaklikste stilte wat Harry nog ooit met Dumbledore beleef het. Dit voel of dit aanhou en aanhou; al wat dit onderbreek, is die snorkgeluidjies uit die portret van Armando Dippet bokant Dumbledore se kop. Harry voel of hy op ’n vreemde manier kleiner word, asof hy effens gekrimp het vandat hy by die kantoor ingekom het.

Toe hy dit nie langer kan verdra nie sê hy: “Professor Dumbledore, ek is regtig jammer. Ek moes meer gedoen het ... Ek moes besef het u sou my nie gevra het om dit te doen as dit nie regtig belangrik was nie.”

“Dankie dat jy dit sê, Harry,” sê Dumbledore sag. “Mag ek dus aanvaar dat hierdie aangeleentheid van nou af hoër prioriteit sal geniet? Daar is geen sin daarin om ná vanaand bymekaar te kom tensy ons daardie herinnering het nie.”

“Ek sal dit doen, professor; ek sal dit by hom kry,” sê Harry ernstig.

“Dan sal ons nie nou verder daaroor praat nie,” sê Dumbledore vriendeliker, “maar ons storie voortsit waar ons dit laas onderbreek het. Onthou jy waar dit was?”

“Ja, professor,” sê Harry vinnig. “Voldemort het sy pa en sy oupa en ouma doodgemaak en dit laat lyk of sy oom Morfin dit gedoen het. Toe gaan hy terug Hogwarts toe en vra ... vra professor Slughorn uit oor Horcruxe,” mompel hy bedremmeld.

“Mooi so,” sê Dumbledore. “Nou ja, ek hoop jy onthou ek het jou reg aan die begin van hierdie ontmoetings van ons vertel dat ons die gebied van raaiwerk en spekulاسie gaan betree?”

“Ja, professor.”

“Ek hoop jy stem saam dat ek vir jou tot dusver redelik betroubare en feitelike inligting gegee het ten opsigte van wat Voldemort tot op die ouderdom van sewentien gedoen het?”

Harry knik.

“Maar nou, Harry,” sê Dumbledore, “nou word dinge meer duister en vreemd. Dit was moeilik om bewysmateriaal oor die seun Riddle te kry, maar haas onmoontlik om enigiemand te vind wat bereid was om hul herinneringe aan die man Voldemort met my te deel. Om die waarheid te sê, ek twyfel of daar ’n lewende siel behalwe hy self is wat vir ons ’n volledige verslag kan gee van sy lewe sedert hy by Hogwarts weg is. Ek het egter twee laaste herinneringe wat ek met

jou wil deel. Dumbledore beduie na die twee glinsterende kristalbotteltjies langs die Peinssif. “Ek sal daarná graag wil hoor of jy dink die afleidings wat ek daaruit gemaak het, is haalbaar.”

Die gedagte dat Dumbledore sy mening so hoog ag, laat Harry selfs nog skamer voel dat hy misluk het in sy taak om die Horcrux-herinnering te kry; hy skuif ongemaklik in sy stoel rond terwyl Dumbledore die eerste van die twee botteltjies na die lig toe ophig en dit bekyk.

“Ek hoop nie jy is moeg daarvoor om by ander mense se herinneringe in te duik nie, want hierdie twee is baie eienaardig,” sê hy. “Die eerste een kom van ’n baie ou huiself genaamd Hokus. Voor ons sien wat Hokus aanskou het, moet ek net vinnig vir jou vertel hoe die Heer Voldemort by Hogwarts weg is.

“Teen die tyd dat hy ’n sewendejaar was, het hy, soos jy sekerlik verwag het, sy hele skoolloopbaan lank die hoogste punte behaal in enige eksamen wat hy afgelê het. Sy klasmaats het begin besluit watter werk hulle wou doen wanneer hulle Hogwarts verlaat. Byna almal het voortreflike dinge verwag van Tom Riddle die prefek, Hoofseun en wenner van die Spesiale Toekenning vir Dienste gelewer aan die Skool. Ek weet verskeie onderwysers, onder andere professor Slughorn, het voorgestel dat hy by die Ministerie van Towerkuns gaan werk; hulle het aangebied om vir hom afsprake te reël en hom met nuttige kontakpersone in aanraking te bring. Hy het al die aanbiedinge egter van die hand gewys. Toe die personeel weer sien, het Voldemort by Borgin en Burkes gewerk.”

“By Borgin en Burkes?” herhaal Harry verstom.

“By Borgin en Burkes,” herhaal Dumbledore kalm. “Ek dink jy sal sien watter aantrekkingskrag die plek vir hom gehad het wanneer ons Hokus se herinnering betree. Maar dit was nie Voldemort se eerste keuse vir ’n werk nie. Destyds het bykans niemand daarvan geweet nie – ek was een van die min wat die Skoolhoof in sy vertroue geneem het – maar Voldemort het professor Dippet genader en gevra of hy as onderwyser by Hogwarts kon aanbly.”

“Hy wou hier gebly het? Hoekom?” vra Harry nou nog meer verbaas.

“Ek dink daar was verskeie redes, hoewel hy nie een daarvan aan professor Dippet toevertrou het nie,” sê Dumbledore. “Eerstens, en baie belangrik, was Voldemort baie meer tot hierdie skool agetrokke as wat hy ooit tot ’n mens was. Hogwarts was die plek waar hy die gelukkigste ooit was; die eerste en enigste plek waar hy tuis gevoel het.”

Hierdie woorde maak Harry effens ongemaklik, want dit is presies hoe hy ook oor Hogwarts voel.

“Tweedens is die kasteel ’n bastion van antieke towerkrag, Voldemort het ongetwyfeld baie meer van sy geheimenisse ontdek as die meeste van die studente wat hier studeer, maar hy het moontlik gevoel daar is nóg geheime om te ontrafel en nóg towerkragte wat hy kan ontgin, hier opgesluit.

“En derdens sou hy as onderwyser baie mag en invloed oor jong hekse en towenaars hê. Miskien het hy die idee gekry by professor Slughorn, die onderwyser met wie hy die beste oor die weg gekom het en wat vir hom gewys het hoe ’n invloedryke rol ’n onderwyser kan speel. Ek dink nie vir een oomblik Voldemort het dit oorweeg om die res van sy lewe in Hogwarts deur te bring nie, maar ek glo wel hy het dit as ’n nuttige werwingsterrein beskou, as die plek waar hy vir hom ’n leër kon begin opbou.”

“Maar toe kry hy nie die pos nie?”

“Nee. Professor Dippet het vir hom gesê hy is op agtien nog te jonk daarvoor, maar hom genooi om ’n paar jaar later weer aansoek te doen as hy dan nog steeds sou wou onderwys gee.”

“Hoe het u daaroor gevoel, professor?” vra Harry huiwerig.

“Baie ongemaklik,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek het Armando afgeraai om hom aan te stel – ek het nie die redes wat ek vir jou gegee het, verskaf nie, want professor Dippet was baie erg oor Voldemort en oortuig van sy eerlikheid – maar ek wou die Heer Voldemort nie terug hier by ons skool hê nie, en veral nie in ’n gesagsposisie nie.”

“Watter pos wou hy hê, professor? Watter vak wou hy gee?”

Harry weet eintlik wat Dumbledore gaan antwoord nog voor hy praat.

“Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste. Dit is destyds onderrig deur ’n ou professor genaam Galatea Merrythought wat toe al amper vyftig jaar lank hier by Hogwarts was.

“So, Voldemort het toe by Borgin en Burkes gaan werk en al die personeellede wat hom bewonder het, het gesê dit is so ’n verkwisting dat ’n briljante jong toenaar soos hy in ’n winkel gaan werk. Voldemort was egter veel meer as net ’n assistent. Hy was beleefd en aantreklik en intelligent, en het spoedig van die soort werk gedoen wat jy net kry by ’n plek soos Borgin en Burkes wat, soos jy weet, in voorwerpe met ongewone en kragtige eienskappe spesialiseer. Voldemort is gestuur om mense te oortuig om hul skatte aan die vennote af te staan sodat hulle dit kon verkoop, en hy was volgens wat ek gehoor het buitengewoon begaafd daarmee.”

“Ek is seker hy was,” sê Harry, wat homself nie in toom kan hou nie.

“Wel, ja,” sê Dumbledore en glimlag vaagweg. “En nou is dit tyd om te hoor van Hokus die huiself wat vir ’n baie ou en baie ryk heks genaamd Hepzibah Smith gewerk het.”

Dumbledore tik met sy towerstaf teen die botteltjie; die kurkprop vlieg af en hy gooi die malende herinnering in die Peinssif terwyl hy sê: “Jy eerste, Harry.”

Harry staan op en buig weer af oor die klipkom se rimpelende silwer inhoud totdat sy gesig daaraan raak. Hy tuimel deur die donker niet en beland in ’n sitkamer voor ’n geweldige vet ou dame wat ’n oordadige gemmer pruik en helderpienk kleed met valle dra wat om haar gedrapeer is en haar laat lyk soos ’n versierde koek wat smelt. Sy kyk in ’n klein spieëltjie omraam met juwele en smeer met ’n groot poeierkwas rooisel aan haar wange wat alreeds baie rooi is terwyl die kleinste en oudste huiself wat Harry nog ooit gesien het haar vlesige voete in stywe satynskoentjies toeryg.

“Maak gou, Hokus!” sê Hepzibah gebiedend. “Hy’t gesê hy kom vieruur; dis nou net ’n paar minute voor en hy was nog nooit laat nie!”

Die huiself kom regop en sy sit haar poeierkwas neer. Die bokant van die elf se kop kom skaars tot by die sitplek van die stoel waarop Hepzibah sit en haar papieragtige vel hang aan haar beendere soos die gestyfde linnelaken wat sy soos ’n toga om haar gedrapeer dra.

“Hoe lyk ek?” vra Hepzibah en draai haar kop om haar gesig van verskillende kante af in die spieël te bewonder.

“Lieflik, juffrou,” piep Hokus.

Harry neem aan dit staan in Hokus se kontrak dat sy soos ’n tandetrekker moet lieg wanneer sy hierdie vraag gevra word, want Hepzibah Smith lyk volgens hom allesbehalwe lieflik.

Die deurklokkie lui klingelend en die meesteres en haar elf wip albei van die skrik.

“Gou, gou, hy’s hier, Hokus!” roep Hepzibah en die elf skarrel uit by die vertrek wat só stampvol voorwerpe staan dat dit moeilik is om te sien hoe enigiemand daardeur kan beweeg sonder om ten minste ’n dosyn goed om te stamp: Daar is kaste vol klein, verniste boksies, kiste vol boeke wat met goud gebosseleer is, rakke vol sferen en hemelbolle en talle welige potplante in koperhouers; die vertrek lyk in werklikheid soos iets tussen ’n magiese oudhedewinkel en ’n glashuis vol plante.

Die huiself is binne enkele minute terug en word gevolg deur ’n lang jong man wat Harry sonder moeite as Voldemort herken. Hy dra ’n eenvoudige swart pak, sy hare is ’n bietjie langer as wat dit op skool was en sy wange is hol, maar dit alles pas hom: Hy lyk aantrekliker as ooit. Hy baan sy weg deur die oorvol vertrek met ’n

houding wat wys hy was vantevore al baie hier; hy buig laag oor Hepzibah se posfferhandjie en raak dit rakelings met sy lippe aan.

“Ek het vir u blomme gebring,” sê hy sag en bring ’n bos rose asof van nêrens te voorskyn.

“Jou stoute seun, jy moes nie!” koer Hepzibah, maar Harry gewaar ’n leë vaas wat op die naaste tafeltjie gereed staan. “Jy bederf hierdie ou dame, Tom ... Kom sit, kom sit ... Waar’s Hokus? ... Aa ...”

Die huiself storm vervaard by die vertrek in met ’n skinkbord vol koekies wat sy by haar meesteres se elmboog neersit.

“Kry gerus vir jou, Tom,” sê Hepzibah, “ek weet hoe lief is jy vir my koekies. Hoe gaan dit met jou? Jy lyk so bleek. Hulle laat jou gans te hard by daai winkel werk; ek het dit al ’n honderd keer gesê ...”

Voldemort glimlag meganies en Hepzibah giggel geaffekteerd.

“Wel, wat is jou verskoning vir vandag se besoek?” vra sy en fladder haar wimpers.

“Meneer Burke wil graag ’n beter aanbod vir die kabouterge-maakte wapenrusting maak,” sê Voldemort. “Hy voel vyfhonderd Galjoene is meer as regverdig –”

“Hokaai nou, nie so vinnig nie, of ek sal dink jy is net hier vir my sierade!” sê Hepzibah pruilend.

“Dis waarvoor ek hierheen gestuur word,” sê Voldemort bedees. “Ek is net ’n arme assistent, juffrou, wat moet maak soos daar vir hom gesê word. Meneer Burke wil hê ek moet uitvind of –”

“Og, meneer Burke, oef!” sê Hepzibah en waai met haar posfhandjie in die lug. “Ek gaan vir jou iets wys wat ek nog nooit vir meneer Burke gewys het nie! Kan jy ’n geheim bewaar, Tom? Belowe my jy sal nooit vir meneer Burke sê dis in my besit nie. Hy sal my nooit met rus laat as hy weet ek het dit vir jou gewys nie, en ek gaan dit nie verkoop nie, nie aan Burke nie, nie aan enigiemand nie! Maar jy, Tom, jy sal dit waardeer vir die geskiedenis daaraan verbonde, en nie dink aan hoeveel Galjoene jy daarvoor kan kry nie ...”

“Ek sal graag enigiets wil sien wat juffrou Hepzibah vir my wil wys,” sê Voldemort onderdanig, en Hepzibah giggel weer guitig.

“Ek het dat Hokus dit vir my gaan uithaal ... Hokus, waar is jy? Ek wil vir meneer Riddle ons grootste skat wys ... Bring sommer albei terwyl jy gaan ...”

“Hier, juffrou,” piep die huiself en Harry sien twee leerbokse, die een bo-op die ander, wat deur die vertrek nader kom asof hulle ’n wil van hul eie het, al weet hy die klein elfie hou hulle bo haar kop terwyl sy tussen tafels, poefs en voetstoele deur vleg.

“Nou ja,” sê Hepzibah opgewonde terwyl sy die bokse by die huiself neem, dit op haar skoot neersit en haar regmaak om die

boonste een oop te maak, “ek dink jy gaan hiervan hou, Tom ... O, as my familie weet wat ek jou nou gaan wys ... Hulle kan nie wag om hul hande hierop te lê nie!”

Sy maak die deksel oop. Harry leun vorentoe om beter te kan sien en daar lê ’n klein goue beker met twee fyn, gesmede handvatsels.

“Ek wonder of jy weet wat dit is, Tom? Tel dit op, bekijk dit mooi!” fluister Hepzibah. Voldemort steek ’n hand met lang vingers uit en lig die beker aan een handvat uit die sylappe waarin dit knus toegemaak lê. Harry verbeel hom hy sien ’n rooi glinstering in sy donker oë. Hepzibah se gesig lyk net so gierig soos Voldemort s’n, maar haar ogies is op sy aantreklike gelaatstrekke vasgenaël.

“’n Dassie,” mompel Voldemort, wat die graveerwerk op die beker bekijk. “Dan was dit ...”

“Helga Hoesenproes s’n, soos wat jy alte goed weet, jou slimme seun!” sê Hepzibah. Haar korsette kraak hard; sy leun vorentoe en gee sy hol wang sowaar ’n knyp. “Het ek nie vir jou gesê ek is ’n verlangse afstammeling nie? Dit word al jare en jare lank van familielid tot familielid oorgedra. Dis lieflik, dink jy nie? En dis ook veronderstel om oor allerhande magte te beskik, maar ek het dit nog nie deeglik op die proef gestel nie. Ek hou dit net mooi veilig hierin ...”

Sy haak die beker van Voldemort se lang voorvinger af en sit dit weer baie versigtig terug in die boks; sy konsentreer te hard daarop om te sien hoe daar vir ’n oomblik ’n skaduwee oor Voldemort se gesig kom toe die beker by hom weggeneem word.

“Nou ja,” sê Hepzibah gelukkig, “waar is Hokus? O ja, daar is jy – neem dit nou weg, Hokus –”

Die elf neem die boks met die beker gedienstig en Hepzibah se aandag is nou by die heelwat platter boks op haar skoot.

“Ek dink jy sal selfs méér hiervan hou, Tom,” fluister sy. “Leun ’n bietjie nader, liewe seun, sodat jy kan sien ... Burke weet natuurlik ek het hierdie een, want ek het dit by hom gekoop en ek vermoed hy sal dit dolgraag wil terugkry wanneer ek nie meer hier is nie ...”

Sy skuif die fyn knip van silwerdraadwerk weg en maak die boks oop. En daar op die gladde karmosynrooi fluweel lê ’n swaar goue hangertjie.

Hierdie keer reik Voldemort se hand sonder uitnodiging uit. Hy hou die hangertjie teen die lig en kyk daarna.

“Slytherin se merk,” sê hy sag terwyl die lig op die ryklik versierde, kronkelende S speel.

“Dis reg!” sê Hepzibah, wat duidelik in haar skik is dat Voldemort haar hangertjie met soveel bewondering bestudeer. “Ek moes ’n klein fortuin daarvoor betaal, maar ek kon so ’n kans nie laat ver-

bygaan nie, nie 'n ware skat soos dié nie; ek moes dit eenvoudig by my versameling voeg. Burke het dit blykbaar by 'n verslonste vrou gekoop wat dit iewers moet gesteel het, maar nie die vaagste benul gehad het hoe waardevol dit is nie –”

Hierdie keer is dit onmiskenbaar: Voldemort se oë flits skarlaken-rooi toe hy haar woorde hoor en Harry sien sy kneukels word wit om die hangertjie se ketting.

“– ek is seker Burke het haar bitter min daarvoor gegee, maar daar het jy dit nou ... Mooi, nè? En weer eens word allerhande magte daaraan toegeskryf, maar ek hou dit net mooi veilig ...”

Sy strek vorentoe om die hangertjie terug te neem. Vir 'n oomblik dink Harry Voldemort gaan dit nie laat los nie, maar dan glip dit deur sy vingers en lê weer op die rooi fluweelkussing.

“Nou toe, Tom, my engel; ek hoop jy't dit geniet!”

Sy kyk hom vol in die gesig en vir die eerste keer sien Harry haar dwase glimlag verstar.

“Voel jy okei, engel?”

“O ja,” sê Voldemort sag. “Ja, ek is piekfyn.”

“Ek dog – dis seker maar net die ligspel wat my oë bedrieg het –” sê Hepzibah en lyk senuagtig. Harry besef sy het ook die vlugtige rooi flikkering in Voldemort se oë gesien. “Hier, Hokus, neem dit weg en sluit dit weer toe ... met die gewone towerspreuke ...”

“Tyd om te gaan, Harry,” sê Dumbledore sag en terwyl die elfie met die bokse wegwaggel, gryp Dumbledore Harry weer eens bo die elmboog vas en hulle styg saam op deur die vergetelheid en beland terug in Dumbledore se kantoor.

“Hepzibah Smith is twee dae ná daardie toneeltjie oorlede,” sê Dumbledore, wat weer gaan sit en vir Harry wys hy moet dieselfde doen. “Die Ministerie het Hokus die huiself skuldig bevind aan die klag dat sy haar meesteres se aandkakao per ongeluk vergiftig het.”

“Se voet!” sê Harry kwaad.

“Ek sien ons voel eenders,” sê Dumbledore. “Daar was beslis baie ooreenkomste tussen hierdie dood en dié van die Riddles. In albei gevalle het iemand anders die skuld gekry; iemand wat duidelik kon onthou hoe hulle die dood veroorsaak het –”

“Hokus het skuld erken?”

“Sy kon onthou dat sy iets in haar meesteres se kakao gegooi het wat toe nie suiker was nie, maar 'n dodelike en onbekende gif,” sê Dumbledore. “Hulle het tot die slotsom gekom dat sy dit nie doelbewus gedoen het nie, maar aangesien sy al oud en deurmekaar was –”

“Voldemort het haar geheue verander, nes hy met Morfin gedoen het!”

“Ja, dis die slotsom waartoe ek ook gekom het,” sê Dumbledore. “En net soos met Morfin was die Ministerie geneig om Hokus te verdink —”

“— omdat sy ’n huiself was,” sê Harry. Hy het selde al soveel simpatie gehad met die SPOEG-vereniging wat Hermione gestig het.

“Presies,” sê Dumbledore. “Sy was oud, sy het erken sy het met die drankie gelol en niemand by die Ministerie het die moeite gedoen om verder navraag daaroor te doen nie. Net soos in Morfin se geval was haar lewe amper om teen die tyd dat ek haar opgespoor en hierdie herinnering by haar gekry het — maar haar geheue bewys natuurlik niks meer as dat Voldemort van die bestaan van die beker en die hangertjie geweet het nie.

“Teen die tyd dat Hokus skuldig bevind is, het Hepzibah se familie besef haar twee grootste skatte was skoonveld. Dit het ’n rukkie geneem voor hulle seker daarvan was, want sy het baie wegsteekplekke gehad omdat sy haar versameling altyd met soveel sorg opgepas het. Maar voor hulle bo alle twyfel seker was dat die beker en die hangertjie albei weg was, het die assistent wat by Borgin en Burkes gewerk het, die jong man wat Hepzibah so gereeld besoek en so betower het, uit sy werk bedank en verdwyn. Sy base het nie ’n idee gehad waarheen hy is nie; hulle was so verbaas soos al die ander mense dat hy net spoorloos weggeraak het. En dit was die laaste keer in ’n baie lang tyd dat enigiemand Tom Riddle gesien of van hom gehoor het.

“En nou,” sê Dumbledore, “as jy nie omgee nie, Harry, wil ek weer eens vertoef om jou aandag op sekere aspekte van die storie te vestig. Voldemort het nóg ’n moord gepleeg; ek weet nie of dit die eerste een ná die moord op die Riddles was nie, maar ek glo so. Soos jy gesien het, was hierdie moord nie om wraak te neem nie, maar vir eie gewin. Hy wou daardie arme ou vrou wat so behep met hom was se twee fantastiese trofee hê. Net soos wat hy die ander kinders in die weeshuis vroeër besteel het, net soos wat hy sy oom Morfin se ring gesteel het, net so het hy nou met Hepzibah se beker en hangertjie verdwyn.”

“Maar,” sê Harry fronsend, “dis malligheid ... Hy’t alles op die spel geplaas, selfs sy werk gelos, net vir daardie ...”

“Dis miskien vir jou malligheid, maar nie vir Voldemort nie,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek hoop jy sal mettertyd begryp presies wat daardie voorwerpe vir hom beteken het, Harry, maar jy moet erken, dit is verstaanbaar dat hy ten minste die hangertjie as sy regmatige eiendom beskou het.”

“Miskien die hangertjie,” sê Harry, “maar hoekom het hy die beker ook gevat?”

“Dit het aan ’n ander stigterslid van Hogwarts behoort,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek dink hy het nog steeds geweldig aangetrokke tot die skool gevoel en hy kon ’n voorwerp wat só deel van Hogwarts se geskiedenis was, net nie weerstaan nie. Ek dink ook daar was ander redes ... Ek hoop ek kan dit mettertyd vir jou bewys.

“En nou die laaste herinnering wat ek vir jou wil wys, ten minste tot jy daarin slaag om professor Slughorn s’n vir ons te bekom. Daar het tien jaar tussen Hokus se herinnering en hierdie een verloop, tien jaar waartydens ons net kan raai wat die Heer Voldemort gedoen het ...”

Harry staan weer op terwyl Dumbledore die laaste herinnering in die Peinssif uitgooi.

“Wie se herinnering is dit?” vra hy.

“Myne,” sê Dumbledore.

Harry duik agter Dumbledore aan deur die bewegende silwer massa en beland in die einste kantoor wat hy so pas verlaat het. Daar sit Fawkes vrolik en dut op sy slaapstok en daar, agter die deur, staan Dumbledore, wat baie lyk soos die Dumbledore wat langs Harry staan hoewel albei sy hande ongedeerd is en sy gesig miskien effens minder plooië het. Die een verskil tussen die huidige kantoor en hierdie een is dat dit in die verlede sneeu; blouerige vlokkies dryf in die donker verby die venster en bou op die buitenste vensterbank op.

Dit lyk of die jonger Dumbledore vir iemand wag en jou waarlik, oomblikke ná hul aankoms is daar ’n klop aan die deur en hy sê: “Binne.”

Harry onderdruk haastig sy asem. Dit is Voldemort wat by die kantoor instap. Sy gelaatstrekke lyk nie soos dié wat Harry amper twee jaar gelede uit die groot klipketel sien verrys het nie; hulle lyk minder soos ’n slang s’n: sy oë is nog nie vuurrooi nie, sy gesig nog nie soos ’n masker nie, en nogtans is hy nie meer die aantreklike Tom Riddle nie. Dit is asof sy gelaatstrekke verbrand en vervaag het; hulle is wasagtig en vreemd verwring; die wit van sy oë lyk nou permanent bloederig, hoewel die pupille nog nie die skrefies is wat Harry weet hulle gaan word nie. Hy dra ’n lang swart mantel, en sy gesig is so bleek soos die sneeu wat op sy skouers glinster.

Die Dumbledore agter die lessenaar toon geen teken dat hy verras is nie. Klaarblyklik het hulle ’n afspraak.

“Goeienaand, Tom,” sê Dumbledore gemaklik. “Sit gerus.”

“Dankie,” sê Voldemort en gaan sit op die stoel waarna Dumbledore beduie – dieselfde stoel waaruit Harry so pas in die toekoms

opgestaan het. “Ek het gehoor jy’s nou die Skoolhoof,” sê hy en sy stem is effens hoër en kouer as vantevore. “’n Goeie keuse.”

“Ek is bly dit dra jou goedkeuring weg,” sê Dumbledore en glimlag. “Iets te drinke vir jou?”

“Dit sal welkom wees,” sê Voldemort. “Ek kom van ver af.”

Dumbledore staan op en stap na die kas waarop hy die Peinssif nou hou, maar wat toe vol bottels gestaan het. Hy gee vir Voldemort ’n glas wyn, skink vir homself ook en kom sit dan weer agter sy lessenaar.

“So, Tom ... waaraan het ek hierdie eer te danke?”

Voldemort antwoord nie dadelik nie; hy teug net aan sy wyn.

“Niemand noem my meer ‘Tom’ nie,” sê hy. “Ek staan deesdae bekend as –”

“Ek weet as wat jy bekend staan,” sê Dumbledore en glimlag vriendelik. “Maar ek is jammer, vir my sal jy altyd Tom Riddle bly. Ek is bevrees dit is een van daardie irriterende dinge van ou onderwysers; hulle vergeet nooit heeltemal diegene wat aan hul sorg toevertrou is se jeugdige begindae nie.”

Hy lig sy glas asof hy ’n heildronk drink op Voldemort, wat hom uitdrukkingloos bly aankyk. Harry voel nogtans ’n subtile verandering in die kantoor se atmosfeer aan: Die feit dat Dumbledore weier om Voldemort se gekose naam te gebruik, dikteer die raamwerk waarbinne hierdie ontmoeting plaasvind, en Harry kan sien Voldemort sien dit ook so in.

“Ek is verbaas dat jy so lank hier bly,” sê Voldemort ná ’n kort pouse. “Ek het nog altyd gewonder hoekom ’n towenaar soos jy nog nooit hier by die skool weg is nie.”

“Wel,” sê Dumbledore, wat nog steeds glimlag, “vir ’n towenaar soos ek is niks belangriker as om klassieke vaardighede oor te dra en jongmense se denkwys te help slyp nie. As ek reg onthou, het jy ook vroeër tot die onderwys aangetrokke gevoel.”

“Ek voel nog steeds so,” sê Voldemort. “Ek het net gewonder hoekom jy – wat so dikwels deur die Ministerie vir advies genader word en wat, as ek my nie misgis nie, al twee keer die pos van Minister aangebied is –”

“Toe ek laas getel het, was dit drie keer,” sê Dumbledore. “Maar die Ministerie was nog nooit vir my aanloklik as ’n loopbaan nie. Dis weer eens iets wat ons gemeen het, dink ek.”

Voldemort knik sonder om te glimlag en neem nog ’n slukkie wyn. Dumbledore onderbreek nie die stilte wat nou tussen hulle opbou nie en wag met ’n aangename uitdrukking van afwagting dat Voldemort eerste praat.

“Ek het teruggekom,” sê hy ná ’n rukkie, “miskien later as wat professor Dippet verwag het ... maar ek het nogtans teruggekom met dieselfde versoek wat hy destyds nie kon toestaan nie omdat ek te jonk was. Ek het gekom om jou te vra om my toe te laat om na die kasteel terug te keer, as ’n onderwyser. Ek veronderstel jy weet ek het baie gesien en gedoen vandat ek hier weg is. Ek kan julle studente dinge wys en vertel wat geen ander towenaar hulle kan leer nie.”

Dumbledore bekijk Voldemort eers ’n ruk lank oor die rand van sy wynglas voor hy praat.

“Ja, ek weet jy het inderdaad baie gesien en gedoen vandat jy hier by ons weg is,” sê hy sag. “Gerugte oor jou doen en late het jou gewese skool bereik, Tom. Dit sal vir my ’n jammerte wees as ek die helfte daarvan moet glo.”

Voldemort se gesig bly strak terwyl hy sê: “Grootsheid ontlok jaloesie, jaloesie lei tot leedvermaak, leedvermaak laat leuens uitbroei. Jy behoort dit te weet, Dumbledore.”

“Noem jy dit wat jy gedoen het ‘grootsheid?’” vra Dumbledore gedemp.

“Beslis,” sê Voldemort en dit lyk of sy oë rooi brand. “Ek het geëksperimenteer; ek het die grense van toorkrag verskuif, heel moontlik verder as wat enigiemand nog ooit kon –”

“Party soorte towerkrag,” help Dumbledore hom sag reg. “Slegs party. Van ander bly jy steeds ... vergewe my ... jammerlik onbewus.”

Vir die eerste keer glimlag Voldemort. Dit is ’n strak grynslag, boosaardig en dreigender as openlike woede.

“Die ou argument,” sê hy sag. “Maar niks wat ek in die wêreld gesien het, staaf jou beroemde uitsprake dat die liefde magtiger as my soort towerkrag is nie, Dumbledore.”

“Miskien het jy op die verkeerde plekke gekyk,” stel Dumbledore voor.

“Nou ja, waar is daar dan ’n beter plek om my soeke opnuut voort te sit as juis hier, in Hogwarts?” sê Voldemort. “Sal jy my toelaat om terug te kom? Sal jy my toelaat om my kennis met jou studente te deel? Ek plaas myself en my talente tot jou beskikking. Ek is tot jou diens.”

Dumbledore lig sy wenkbroue.

“En wat gaan word van diegene wat in jou diens is? Wat gaan word van hulle wat hulself – volgens gerugte – die Doodseters noem?”

Harry kan sien Voldemort het nie verwag dat Dumbledore van hierdie naam sal weet nie; hy sien hoe Voldemort se oë weer rooi flits en sy skrefiesneusgate tril.

“My vriende,” sê hy ná ’n oomblik van stilte, “sal sonder my voortgaan, daarvan is ek seker.”

“Ek is bly jy beskou hulle as vriende,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek was onder die indruk hulle is meer soos knegte.”

“Jy misgis jou,” sê Voldemort.

“So as ek vanaand na die Swynenes toe sou gaan, sal ek nie ’n groep van hulle – Nott, Rosier, Mulciber en Dolohov – daar aantref wat vir jou wag om terug te kom nie? Getroue vriende inderdaad, om op ’n nag wat dit sneeu só ver saam met jou te reis bloot om jou voorspoed toe te wens in jou poging om ’n onderwyspos los te slaan.”

Dumbledore se breedvoerige kennis omtrent diegene wat saam met hom reis, vang Voldemort ongetwyfeld selfs nog meer onkant, maar hy herstel omtrent onmiddellik.

“Jy is so alwetend soos altyd, Dumbledore.”

“O nee, bloot bevriend met die plaaslike kroegmanne,” sê Dumbledore ligweg. “En nou, Tom ...”

Dumbledore sit sy leë glas neer en trek homself regop in sy stoel, sy vingerpunte bymekaar in ’n baie kenmerkende gebaar.

“... laat ons openlik praat. Hoekom het jy vanaand omring deur jou trawante, hierheen gekom om aansoek te doen vir ’n werk wat ons albei weet jy nie wil hê nie?”

Voldemort lyk kil verbaas.

“’n Werk wat ek nie wil hê nie? Inteendeel, Dumbledore, ek wil dit baie graag hê.”

“O, ek weet jy wil terugkom Hogwarts toe, maar jy wil net so min nou skoolhou as wat jy dit wou doen toe jy agtien was. Wat wil jy hê, Tom? Hoekom is jy nie net een keer openlik daaroor nie?”

Voldemort grynslag.

“As jy nie vir my werk wil gee nie –”

“Natuurlik wil ek nie,” sê Dumbledore. “En ek dink nie jy het vir een oomblik verwag ek sal dit doen nie, maar jy het nogtans hierheen gekom om my te vra, so daar moet iets daaragter steek.”

Voldemort staan op. Hy lyk minder as ooit soos Tom Riddle; sy gelaatstrekke is verwronge van woede.

“Is dit jou finale besluit?”

“Dit is,” sê Dumbledore wat nou ook staan.

“Dan het ons niks meer om vir mekaar te sê nie.”

“Nee, niks,” sê Dumbledore en ’n groot hartseer kom oor sy gesig. “Die dae dat ek jou met ’n brandende klerekas kon bangmaak en jou kon dwing om vir jou misdade te vergoed, is lankal reeds verby. Maar ek wens ek kon, Tom ... Ek wens ek kon ...”

Vir 'n sekonde is Harry op die punt om 'n nuttelose waarskuwing uit te gil; dit lyk vir hom of Voldemort se hand sy towerstaf uit sy sak wil pluk, maar dan gaan daardie oomblik verby en Voldemort draai om, loop uit, maak die deur agter hom toe en is weg.

Harry voel Dumbledore se hand weer op sy arm en oomblikke later staan hulle op amper presies dieselfde plek, maar daar is nou nie sneeu wat op die vensterbank saampak nie en Dumbledore se hand lyk weer swart en dood.

“Hoekom?” vra Harry dadelik en kyk op in Dumbledore se gesig. “Hoekom het hy teruggekom? Het professor ooit uitgevind?”

“Ek het vermoedens,” sê Dumbledore, “maar niks meer as dit nie.”

“Watter vermoedens, professor?”

“Ek sal jou vertel, Harry, wanneer jy professor Slughorn se herinnering vir ons bekom het,” sê Dumbledore. “Wanneer ons die laaste stukkie van die legkaart het, sal alles hopelik duidelik wees ... vir ons albei.”

Harry brand nog steeds van nuuskierigheid en selfs al het Dumbledore deur toe geloop en hou hy dit nou vir hom oop, beweeg hy nie dadelik nie.

“Wou hy weer die pos vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste hê, professor? Hy't nie gesê of ...”

“O ja, hy wou definitief die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunstepos hê,” sê Dumbledore. “Die nadraai van ons ontmoeting het dit bewys. Jy sien, ná ek geweier het om die pos van Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste vir die Heer Voldemort te gee, het nog nie een onderwyser dit langer as 'n jaar in daardie pos uitgehou nie.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



THE UNKNOWNABLE ROOM

Harry wracked his brains over the next week as to how he was to persuade Slughorn to hand over the true memory, but nothing in the nature of a brain wave occurred and he was reduced to doing what he did increasingly these days when at a loss: poring over his Potions book, hoping that the Prince would have scribbled something useful in a margin, as he had done so many times before.

“You won’t find anything in there,” said Hermione firmly, late on Sunday evening.

“Don’t start, Hermione,” said Harry. “If it hadn’t been for the Prince, Ron wouldn’t be sitting here now.”

“He would if you’d just listened to Snape in our first year,” said

Hermione dismissively.

Harry ignored her. He had just found an incantation (“*Sectumsempra!*”) scrawled in a margin above the intriguing words “For Enemies,” and was itching to try it out, but thought it best not to in front of Hermione. Instead, he surreptitiously folded down the corner of the page.

They were sitting beside the fire in the common room; the only other people awake were fellow sixth years. There had been a certain amount of excitement earlier when they had come back from dinner to find a new sign on the notice board that announced the date for their Apparition Test. Those who would be seventeen on or before the first test date, the twenty-first of April, had the option of signing up for additional practice sessions, which would take place (heavily supervised) in Hogsmeade.

Ron had panicked on reading this notice; he had still not managed to Apparate and feared he would not be ready for the test. Hermione, who had now achieved Apparition twice, was a little more confident, but Harry, who would not be seventeen for another four months, could not take the test whether ready or not.

“At least you can Apparate, though!” said Ron tensely. “You’ll have no trouble come July!”

“I’ve only done it once,” Harry reminded him; he had finally managed to disappear and rematerialize inside his hoop during their previous lesson.

Having wasted a lot of time worrying aloud about Apparition, Ron was now struggling to finish a viciously difficult essay for Snape that Harry and Hermione had already completed. Harry fully expected to

receive low marks on his, because he had disagreed with Snape on the best way to tackle dementors, but he did not care: Slughorn's memory was the most important thing to him now.

"I'm telling you, the stupid Prince isn't going to be able to help you with this, Harry!" said Hermione, more loudly. "There's only one way to force someone to do what you want, and that's the Imperius Curse, which is illegal —"

"Yeah, I know that, thanks," said Harry, not looking up from the book. "That's why I'm looking for something different. Dumbledore says Veritaserum won't do it, but there might be something else, a potion or a spell. . . ."

"You're going about it the wrong way," said Hermione. "Only you can get the memory, Dumbledore says. That must mean you can persuade Slughorn where other people can't. It's not a question of slipping him a potion, anyone could do that —"

"How d'you spell 'belligerent'?" said Ron, shaking his quill very hard while staring at his parchment. "It can't be B — U — M —"

"No, it isn't," said Hermione, pulling Ron's essay toward her. "And 'augury' doesn't begin O — R — G either. What kind of quill are you using?"

"It's one of Fred and George's Spell-Check ones . . . but I think the charm must be wearing off. . . ."

"Yes, it must," said Hermione, pointing at the title of his essay, "because we were asked how we'd deal with dementors, not 'Dugbogs,' and I don't remember you changing your name to 'Roonil Wazlib' either."

"Ah no!" said Ron, staring horror-struck at the parchment. "Don't

say I'll have to write the whole thing out again!"

"It's okay, we can fix it," said Hermione, pulling the essay toward her and taking out her wand.

"I love you, Hermione," said Ron, sinking back in his chair, rubbing his eyes wearily.

Hermione turned faintly pink, but merely said, "Don't let Lavender hear you saying that."

"I won't," said Ron into his hands. "Or maybe I will . . . then she'll ditch me . . ."

"Why don't you ditch her if you want to finish it?" asked Harry.

"You haven't ever chucked anyone, have you?" said Ron. "You and Cho just —"

"Sort of fell apart, yeah," said Harry.

"Wish that would happen with me and Lavender," said Ron gloomily, watching Hermione silently tapping each of his misspelled words with the end of her wand, so that they corrected themselves on the page. "But the more I hint I want to finish it, the tighter she holds on. It's like going out with the giant squid."

"There," said Hermione, some twenty minutes later, handing back Ron's essay.

"Thanks a million," said Ron. "Can I borrow your quill for the conclusion?"

Harry, who had found nothing useful in the Half-Blood Prince's notes so far, looked around; the three of them were now the only ones left in the common room, Seamus having just gone up to bed cursing Snape and his essay. The only sounds were the crackling of the fire and Ron scratching out one last paragraph on dementors using

Hermione's quill. Harry had just closed the Half-Blood Prince's book, yawning, when —

Crack.

Hermione let out a little shriek; Ron spilled ink all over his freshly completed essay, and Harry said, "Kreacher!"

The house-elf bowed low and addressed his own gnarled toes.

"Master said he wanted regular reports on what the Malfoy boy is doing, so Kreacher has come to give —"

Crack.

Dobby appeared alongside Kreacher, his tea-cozy hat askew.

"Dobby has been helping too, Harry Potter!" he squeaked, casting Kreacher a resentful look. "And Kreacher ought to tell Dobby when he is coming to see Harry Potter so they can make their reports together!"

"What is this?" asked Hermione, still looking shocked by these sudden appearances. "What's going on, Harry?"

Harry hesitated before answering, because he had not told Hermione about setting Kreacher and Dobby to tail Malfoy; house-elves were always such a touchy subject with her.

"Well . . . they've been following Malfoy for me," he said.

"Night and day," croaked Kreacher.

"Dobby has not slept for a week, Harry Potter!" said Dobby proudly, swaying where he stood.

Hermione looked indignant.

"You haven't slept, Dobby? But surely, Harry, you didn't tell him not to —"

“No, of course I didn’t,” said Harry quickly. “Dobby, you can sleep, all right? But has either of you found out anything?” he hastened to ask, before Hermione could intervene again.

“Master Malfoy moves with a nobility that befits his pure blood,” croaked Kreacher at once. “His features recall the fine bones of my mistress and his manners are those of —”

“Draco Malfoy is a bad boy!” squeaked Dobby angrily. “A bad boy who — who —”

He shuddered from the tassel of his tea cozy to the toes of his socks and then ran at the fire, as though about to dive into it; Harry, to whom this was not entirely unexpected, caught him around the middle and held him fast. For a few seconds Dobby struggled, then went limp.

“Thank you, Harry Potter,” he panted. “Dobby still finds it difficult to speak ill of his old masters. . . .”

Harry released him; Dobby straightened his tea cozy and said defiantly to Kreacher, “But Kreacher should know that Draco Malfoy is not a good master to a house-elf!”

“Yeah, we don’t need to hear about you being in love with Malfoy,” Harry told Kreacher. “Let’s fast forward to where he’s actually been going.”

Kreacher bowed again, looking furious, and then said, “Master Malfoy eats in the Great Hall, he sleeps in a dormitory in the dungeons, he attends his classes in a variety of —”

“Dobby, you tell me,” said Harry, cutting across Kreacher. “Has he been going anywhere he shouldn’t have?”

“Harry Potter, sir,” squeaked Dobby, his great orblike eyes shining

in the firelight, “the Malfoy boy is breaking no rules that Dobby can discover, but he is still keen to avoid detection. He has been making regular visits to the seventh floor with a variety of other students, who keep watch for him while he enters —”

“The Room of Requirement!” said Harry, smacking himself hard on the forehead with *Advanced Potion-Making*. Hermione and Ron stared at him. “That’s where he’s been sneaking off to! That’s where he’s doing . . . whatever he’s doing! And I bet that’s why he’s been disappearing off the map — come to think of it, I’ve never seen the Room of Requirement on there!”

“Maybe the Marauders never knew the room was there,” said Ron.

“I think it’ll be part of the magic of the room,” said Hermione. “If you need it to be Unplottable, it will be.”

“Dobby, have you managed to get in to have a look at what Malfoy’s doing?” said Harry eagerly.

“No, Harry Potter, that is impossible,” said Dobby.

“No, it’s not,” said Harry at once. “Malfoy got into our headquarters there last year, so I’ll be able to get in and spy on him, no problem.”

“But I don’t think you will, Harry,” said Hermione slowly. “Malfoy already knew exactly how we were using the room, didn’t he, because that stupid Marietta had blabbed. He needed the room to become the headquarters of the D.A., so it did. But you don’t know what the room becomes when Malfoy goes in there, so you don’t know what to ask it to transform into.”

“There’ll be a way around that,” said Harry dismissively. “You’ve done brilliantly, Dobby.”

“Kreacher’s done well too,” said Hermione kindly; but far from looking grateful, Kreacher averted his huge, bloodshot eyes and croaked at the ceiling, “The Mudblood is speaking to Kreacher, Kreacher will pretend he cannot hear —”

“Get out of it,” Harry snapped at him, and Kreacher made one last deep bow and Disapparated. “You’d better go and get some sleep too, Dobby.”

“Thank you, Harry Potter, sir!” squeaked Dobby happily, and he too vanished.

“How good’s this?” said Harry enthusiastically, turning to Ron and Hermione the moment the room was elf-free again. “We know where Malfoy’s going! We’ve got him cornered now!”

“Yeah, it’s great,” said Ron glumly, who was attempting to mop up the sodden mass of ink that had recently been an almost completed essay. Hermione pulled it toward her and began siphoning the ink off with her wand.

“But what’s all this about him going up there with a ‘variety of students’?” said Hermione. “How many people are in on it? You wouldn’t think he’d trust lots of them to know what he’s doing. . . .”

“Yeah, that is weird,” said Harry, frowning. “I heard him telling Crabbe it wasn’t Crabbe’s business what he was doing . . . so what’s he telling all these . . . all these . . .”

Harry’s voice tailed away; he was staring at the fire.

“God, I’ve been stupid,” he said quietly. “It’s obvious, isn’t it? There was a great vat of it down in the dungeon. . . . He could’ve nicked some any time during that lesson. . . .”

“Nicked what?” said Ron.

“Polyjuice Potion. He stole some of the Polyjuice Potion Slughorn showed us in our first Potions lesson. . . . There aren’t a whole variety of students standing guard for Malfoy . . . it’s just Crabbe and Goyle as usual. . . . Yeah, it all fits!” said Harry, jumping up and starting to pace in front of the fire. “They’re stupid enough to do what they’re told even if he won’t tell them what he’s up to . . . but he doesn’t want them to be seen lurking around outside the Room of Requirement, so he’s got them taking Polyjuice to make them look like other people. . . . Those two girls I saw him with when he missed Quidditch — ha! Crabbe and Goyle!”

“Do you mean to say,” said Hermione in a hushed voice, “that that little girl whose scales I repaired — ?”

“Yeah, of course!” said Harry loudly, staring at her. “Of course! Malfoy must’ve been inside the room at the time, so she — what am I talking about? — *he* dropped the scales to tell Malfoy not to come out, because there was someone there! And there was that girl who dropped the toadspawn too! We’ve been walking past him all the time and not realizing it!”

“He’s got Crabbe and Goyle transforming into girls?” guffawed Ron. “Blimey . . . No wonder they don’t look too happy these days. . . . I’m surprised they don’t tell him to stuff it. . . .”

“Well, they wouldn’t, would they, if he’s shown them his Dark Mark?” said Harry.

“Hmmm . . . the Dark Mark we don’t know exists,” said Hermione skeptically, rolling up Ron’s dried essay before it could come to any more harm and handing it to him.

“We’ll see,” said Harry confidently.

“Yes, we will,” Hermione said, getting to her feet and stretching. “But, Harry, before you get all excited, I still don’t think you’ll be able to get into the Room of Requirement without knowing what’s there first. And I don’t think you should forget” — she heaved her bag onto her shoulder and gave him a very serious look — “that what you’re *supposed* to be concentrating on is getting that memory from Slughorn. Good night.”

Harry watched her go, feeling slightly disgruntled. Once the door to the girls’ dormitories had closed behind her he rounded on Ron.

“What d’you think?”

“Wish I could Disapparate like a house-elf,” said Ron, staring at the spot where Dobby had vanished. “I’d have that Apparition Test in the bag.”

Harry did not sleep well that night. He lay awake for what felt like hours, wondering how Malfoy was using the Room of Requirement and what he, Harry, would see when he went in there the following day, for whatever Hermione said, Harry was sure that if Malfoy had been able to see the headquarters of the D.A., he would be able to see Malfoy’s . . . what could it be? A meeting place? A hideout? A storeroom? A workshop? Harry’s mind worked feverishly and his dreams, when he finally fell asleep, were broken and disturbed by images of Malfoy, who turned into Slughorn, who turned into Snape. . . .

Harry was in a state of great anticipation over breakfast the following morning; he had a free period before Defense Against the Dark Arts and was determined to spend it trying to get into the Room of Requirement. Hermione was rather ostentatiously showing no

interest in his whispered plans for forcing entry into the room, which irritated Harry, because he thought she might be a lot of help if she wanted to.

“Look,” he said quietly, leaning forward and putting a hand on the *Daily Prophet*, which she had just removed from a post owl, to stop her from opening it and vanishing behind it. “I haven’t forgotten about Slughorn, but I haven’t got a clue how to get that memory off him, and until I get a brain wave why shouldn’t I find out what Malfoy’s doing?”

“I’ve already told you, you need to *persuade* Slughorn,” said Hermione. “It’s not a question of tricking him or bewitching him, or Dumbledore could have done it in a second. Instead of messing around outside the Room of Requirement” — she jerked the *Prophet* out from under Harry’s hand and unfolded it to look at the front page — “you should go and find Slughorn and start appealing to his better nature.”

“Anyone we know — ?” asked Ron, as Hermione scanned the headlines.

“Yes!” said Hermione, causing both Harry and Ron to gag on their breakfast. “But it’s all right, he’s not dead — it’s Mundungus, he’s been arrested and sent to Azkaban! Something to do with impersonating an Inferius during an attempted burglary . . . and someone called Octavius Pepper has vanished. . . . Oh, and how horrible, a nine-year-old boy has been arrested for trying to kill his grandparents, they think he was under the Imperius Curse. . . .”

They finished their breakfast in silence. Hermione set off immediately for Ancient Runes; Ron for the common room, where he

still had to finish his conclusion on Snape's dementor essay; and Harry for the corridor on the seventh floor and the stretch of wall opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy teaching trolls to do ballet.

Harry slipped on his Invisibility Cloak once he had found an empty passage, but he need not have bothered. When he reached his destination he found it deserted. Harry was not sure whether his chances of getting inside the room were better with Malfoy inside it or out, but at least his first attempt was not going to be complicated by the presence of Crabbe or Goyle pretending to be an eleven-year-old girl.

He closed his eyes as he approached the place where the Room of Requirement's door was concealed. He knew what he had to do; he had become most accomplished at it last year. Concentrating with all his might he thought, *I need to see what Malfoy's doing in here. . . . I need to see what Malfoy's doing in here. . . . I need to see what Malfoy's doing in here. . . .*

Three times he walked past the door; then, his heart pounding with excitement, he opened his eyes and faced it —”

But he was still looking at a stretch of mundanely blank wall.

He moved forward and gave it an experimental push. The stone remained solid and unyielding.

“Okay,” said Harry aloud. “Okay . . . I thought the wrong thing. . . .”

He pondered for a moment then set off again, eyes closed, concentrating as hard as he could.

I need to see the place where Malfoy keeps coming secretly. . . . I

need to see the place where Malfoy keeps coming secretly. . . .

After three walks past, he opened his eyes expectantly.

There was no door.

“Oh, come off it,” he told the wall irritably. “That was a clear instruction. . . . Fine . . .”

He thought hard for several minutes before striding off once more.

I need you to become the place you become for Draco Malfoy. . . .

He did not immediately open his eyes when he had finished his patrolling; he was listening hard, as though he might hear the door pop into existence. He heard nothing, however, except the distant twittering of birds outside. He opened his eyes.

There was still no door.

Harry swore. Someone screamed. He looked around to see a gaggle of first years running back around the corner, apparently under the impression that they had just encountered a particularly foulmouthed ghost.

Harry tried every variation of “I need to see what Draco Malfoy is doing inside you” that he could think of for a whole hour, at the end of which he was forced to concede that Hermione might have had a point: The room simply did not want to open for him. Frustrated and annoyed, he set off for Defense Against the Dark Arts, pulling off his Invisibility Cloak and stuffing it into his bag as he went.

“Late again, Potter,” said Snape coldly, as Harry hurried into the candlelit classroom. “Ten points from Gryffindor.”

Harry scowled at Snape as he flung himself into the seat beside Ron; half the class was still on its feet, taking out books and

organizing their things; he could not be much later than any of them.

“Before we start, I want your dementor essays,” said Snape, waving his wand carelessly, so that twenty-five scrolls of parchment soared into the air and landed in a neat pile on his desk. “And I hope for your sakes they are better than the tripe I had to endure on resisting the Imperius Curse. Now, if you will all open your books to page — what is it, Mr. Finnigan?”

“Sir,” said Seamus, “I’ve been wondering, how do you tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost? Because there was something in the paper about an Inferius —”

“No, there wasn’t,” said Snape in a bored voice.

“But sir, I heard people talking —”

“If you had actually read the article in question, Mr. Finnigan, you would have known that the so-called Inferius was nothing but a smelly sneak thief by the name of Mundungus Fletcher.”

“I thought Snape and Mundungus were on the same side,” muttered Harry to Ron and Hermione. “Shouldn’t he be upset Mundungus has been arrest —”

“But Potter seems to have a lot to say on the subject,” said Snape, pointing suddenly at the back of the room, his black eyes fixed on Harry. “Let us ask Potter how we would tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost.”

The whole class looked around at Harry, who hastily tried to recall what Dumbledore had told him the night that they had gone to visit Slughorn.

“Er — well — ghosts are transparent —” he said.

“Oh, very good,” interrupted Snape, his lip curling. “Yes, it is easy

to see that nearly six years of magical education have not been wasted on you, Potter. *'Ghosts are transparent.'*”

Pansy Parkinson let out a high-pitched giggle. Several other people were smirking. Harry took a deep breath and continued calmly, though his insides were boiling, “Yeah, ghosts are transparent, but Inferi are dead bodies, aren’t they? So they’d be solid —”

“A five-year-old could have told us as much,” sneered Snape. “The Inferius is a corpse that has been reanimated by a Dark wizard’s spells. It is not alive, it is merely used like a puppet to do the wizard’s bidding. A ghost, as I trust that you are all aware by now, is the imprint of a departed soul left upon the earth . . . and of course, as Potter so wisely tells us, *transparent*.”

“Well, what Harry said is the most useful if we’re trying to tell them apart!” said Ron. “When we come face-to-face with one down a dark alley, we’re going to be having a shufti to see if it’s solid, aren’t we, we’re not going to be asking, ‘Excuse me, are you the imprint of a departed soul?’”

There was a ripple of laughter, instantly quelled by the look Snape gave the class.

“Another ten points from Gryffindor,” said Snape. “I would expect nothing more sophisticated from you, Ronald Weasley, the boy so solid he cannot Apparate half an inch across a room.”

“No!” whispered Hermione, grabbing Harry’s arm as he opened his mouth furiously. “There’s no point, you’ll just end up in detention again, leave it!”

“Now open your books to page two hundred and thirteen,” said Snape, smirking a little, “and read the first two paragraphs on the

Cruciatus Curse. . . .”

Ron was very subdued all through the class. When the bell sounded at the end of the lesson, Lavender caught up with Ron and Harry (Hermione mysteriously melted out of sight as she approached) and abused Snape hotly for his jibe about Ron’s Apparition, but this seemed to merely irritate Ron, and he shook her off by making a detour into the boys’ bathroom with Harry.

“Snape’s right, though, isn’t he?” said Ron, after staring into a cracked mirror for a minute or two. “I dunno whether it’s worth me taking the test. I just can’t get the hang of Apparition.”

“You might as well do the extra practice sessions in Hogsmeade and see where they get you,” said Harry reasonably. “It’ll be more interesting than trying to get into a stupid hoop anyway. Then, if you’re still not — you know — as good as you’d like to be, you can postpone the test, do it with me over the summ — Myrtle, this is the boys’ bathroom!”

The ghost of a girl had risen out of the toilet in a cubicle behind them and was now floating in midair, staring at them through thick, white, round glasses.

“Oh,” she said glumly. “It’s you two.”

“Who were you expecting?” said Ron, looking at her in the mirror.

“Nobody,” said Myrtle, picking moodily at a spot on her chin. “He said he’d come back and see me, but then *you* said you’d pop in and visit me too” — she gave Harry a reproachful look — “and I haven’t seen you for months and months. I’ve learned not to expect too much from boys.”

“I thought you lived in that girls’ bathroom?” said Harry, who had

been careful to give the place a wide berth for some years now.

“I do,” she said, with a sulky little shrug, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t *visit* other places. I came and saw you in your bath once, remember?”

“Vividly,” said Harry.

“But I thought he liked me,” she said plaintively. “Maybe if you two left, he’d come back again. . . . We had lots in common. . . . I’m sure he felt it. . . .”

And she looked hopefully toward the door.

“When you say you had lots in common,” said Ron, sounding rather amused now, “d’you mean he lives in an S-bend too?”

“No,” said Myrtle defiantly, her voice echoing loudly around the old tiled bathroom. “I mean he’s sensitive, people bully him too, and he feels lonely and hasn’t got anybody to talk to, and he’s not afraid to show his feelings and cry!”

“There’s been a boy in here crying?” said Harry curiously. “A young boy?”

“Never you mind!” said Myrtle, her small, leaky eyes fixed on Ron, who was now definitely grinning. “I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone, and I’ll take his secret to the —”

“— not the grave, surely?” said Ron with a snort. “The sewers, maybe . . .”

Myrtle gave a howl of rage and dived back into the toilet, causing water to slop over the sides and onto the floor. Goading Myrtle seemed to have put fresh heart into Ron.

“You’re right,” he said, swinging his schoolbag back over his shoulder, “I’ll do the practice sessions in Hogsmeade before I decide

about taking the test.”

And so the following weekend, Ron joined Hermione and the rest of the sixth years who would turn seventeen in time to take the test in a fortnight. Harry felt rather jealous watching them all get ready to go into the village; he missed making trips there, and it was a particularly fine spring day, one of the first clear skies they had seen in a long time. However, he had decided to use the time to attempt another assault on the Room of Requirement.

“You’d do better,” said Hermione, when he confided this plan to Ron and her in the entrance hall, “to go straight to Slughorn’s office and try and get that memory from him.”

“I’ve been trying!” said Harry crossly, which was perfectly true. He had lagged behind after every Potions lesson that week in an attempt to corner Slughorn, but the Potions master always left the dungeon so fast that Harry had not been able to catch him. Twice, Harry had gone to his office and knocked, but received no reply, though on the second occasion he was sure he had heard the quickly stifled sounds of an old gramophone.

“He doesn’t want to talk to me, Hermione! He can tell I’ve been trying to get him on his own again, and he’s not going to let it happen!”

“Well, you’ve just got to keep at it, haven’t you?”

The short queue of people waiting to file past Filch, who was doing his usual prodding act with the Secrecy Sensor, moved forward a few steps and Harry did not answer in case he was overheard by the caretaker. He wished Ron and Hermione both luck, then turned and climbed the marble staircase again, determined, whatever

Hermione said, to devote an hour or two to the Room of Requirement.

Once out of sight of the entrance hall, Harry pulled the Marauder's Map and his Invisibility Cloak from his bag. Having concealed himself, he tapped the map, murmured, "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,*" and scanned it carefully.

As it was Sunday morning, nearly all the students were inside their various common rooms, the Gryffindors in one tower, the Ravenclaws in another, the Slytherins in the dungeons, and the Hufflepuffs in the basement near the kitchens. Here and there a stray person meandered around the library or up a corridor. . . . There were a few people out in the grounds . . . and there, alone in the seventh-floor corridor, was Gregory Goyle. There was no sign of the Room of Requirement, but Harry was not worried about that; if Goyle was standing guard outside it, the room was open, whether the map was aware of it or not. He therefore sprinted up the stairs, slowing down only when he reached the corner into the corridor, when he began to creep, very slowly, toward the very same little girl, clutching her heavy brass scales, that Hermione had so kindly helped a fortnight before. He waited until he was right behind her before bending very low and whispering, "Hello . . . you're very pretty, aren't you?"

Goyle gave a high-pitched scream of terror, threw the scales up into the air, and sprinted away, vanishing from sight long before the sound of the scales smashing had stopped echoing around the corridor. Laughing, Harry turned to contemplate the blank wall behind which, he was sure, Draco Malfoy was now standing frozen,

aware that someone unwelcome was out there, but not daring to make an appearance. It gave Harry a most agreeable feeling of power as he tried to remember what form of words he had not yet tried.

Yet this hopeful mood did not last long. Half an hour later, having tried many more variations of his request to see what Malfoy was up to, the wall was just as doorless as ever. Harry felt frustrated beyond belief; Malfoy might be just feet away from him, and there was still not the tiniest shred of evidence as to what he was doing in there. Losing his patience completely, Harry ran at the wall and kicked it.

“OUCH!”

He thought he might have broken his toe; as he clutched it and hopped on one foot, the Invisibility Cloak slipped off him.

“Harry?”

He spun around, one-legged, and toppled over. There, to his utter astonishment, was Tonks, walking toward him as though she frequently strolled up this corridor.

“What’re you doing here?” he said, scrambling to his feet again; why did she always have to find him lying on the floor?

“I came to see Dumbledore,” said Tonks.

Harry thought she looked terrible: thinner than usual, her mouse-colored hair lank.

“His office isn’t here,” said Harry, “it’s round the other side of the castle, behind the gargoyles —”

“I know,” said Tonks. “He’s not there. Apparently he’s gone away again.”

“Has he?” said Harry, putting his bruised foot gingerly back on the floor. “Hey — you don’t know where he goes, I suppose?”

“No,” said Tonks.

“What did you want to see him about?”

“Nothing in particular,” said Tonks, picking, apparently unconsciously, at the sleeve of her robe. “I just thought he might know what’s going on. . . . I’ve heard rumors . . . people getting hurt . . .”

“Yeah, I know, it’s all been in the papers,” said Harry. “That little kid trying to kill his —”

“The *Prophet*’s often behind the times,” said Tonks, who didn’t seem to be listening to him. “You haven’t had any letters from anyone in the Order recently?”

“No one from the Order writes to me anymore,” said Harry, “not since Sirius —”

He saw that her eyes had filled with tears.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered awkwardly. “I mean . . . I miss him, as well. . . .”

“What?” said Tonks blankly, as though she had not heard him. “Well . . . I’ll see you around, Harry . . .”

And she turned abruptly and walked back down the corridor, leaving Harry to stare after her. After a minute or so, he pulled the Invisibility Cloak on again and resumed his efforts to get into the Room of Requirement, but his heart was not in it. Finally, a hollow feeling in his stomach and the knowledge that Ron and Hermione would soon be back for lunch made him abandon the attempt and leave the corridor to Malfoy who, hopefully, would be too afraid to leave for some hours to come.

He found Ron and Hermione in the Great Hall, already halfway through an early lunch.

"I did it — well, kind of!" Ron told Harry enthusiastically when he caught sight of him. "I was supposed to be Apparating to outside Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop and I overshot it a bit, ended up near Scrivenshaft's, but at least I moved!"

"Good one," said Harry. "How'd you do, Hermione?"

"Oh, she was perfect, obviously," said Ron, before Hermione could answer. "Perfect deliberation, divination, and desperation or whatever the hell it is — we all went for a quick drink in the Three Broomsticks after and you should've heard Twycross going on about her — I'll be surprised if he doesn't pop the question soon —"

"And what about you?" asked Hermione, ignoring Ron. "Have you been up at the Room of Requirement all this time?"

"Yep," said Harry. "And guess who I ran into up there? Tonks!"

"Tonks?" repeated Ron and Hermione together, looking surprised.

"Yeah, she said she'd come to visit Dumbledore. . . ."

"If you ask me," said Ron once Harry had finished describing his conversation with Tonks, "she's cracking up a bit. Losing her nerve after what happened at the Ministry."

"It's a bit odd," said Hermione, who for some reason looked very concerned. "She's supposed to be guarding the school, why's she suddenly abandoning her post to come and see Dumbledore when he's not even here?"

"I had a thought," said Harry tentatively. He felt strange about voicing it; this was much more Hermione's territory than his. "You don't think she can have been . . . you know . . . in love with Sirius?"

Hermione stared at him.

"What on earth makes you say that?"

“I dunno,” said Harry, shrugging, “but she was nearly crying when I mentioned his name . . . and her Patronus is a big four-legged thing now. . . . I wondered whether it hadn’t become . . . you know . . . him.”

“It’s a thought,” said Hermione slowly. “But I still don’t know why she’d be bursting into the castle to see Dumbledore, if that’s really why she was here. . . .”

“Goes back to what I said, doesn’t it?” said Ron, who was now shoveling mashed potato into his mouth. “She’s gone a bit funny. Lost her nerve. Women,” he said wisely to Harry, “they’re easily upset.”

“And yet,” said Hermione, coming out of her reverie, “I doubt you’d find a *woman* who sulked for half an hour because Madam Rosmerta didn’t laugh at their joke about the hag, the Healer, and the *Mimbulus mimbletonia*.”

Ron scowled.

Die Onkenbare Vertrek

Harry breek sy kop gedurende die volgende week oor hoe hy Slughorn kan oortuig om die ware herinnering vir hom te gee, maar geen skitterende ingewings skiet hom te binne nie en hy is verplig om te doen wat hy deesdae al hoe meer doen wanneer hy raadop is: Hy verdiep hom in sy Towerdrankieboek met die hoop dat die Prins iewers in 'n kantlyn iets neergeskryf het wat, soos soveel keer vantevore al, vir hom van groot nut sal wees.

“Jy gaan niks daarin kry nie,” sê Hermione streng, laat een Sondagaand.

“Moenie weer daarmee begin nie, Hermione,” sê Harry. “As dit nie vir die Prins was nie, sou Ron nie nou hier gesit het nie.”

“Hy sou, as jy net in ons eerste jaar na Snape geluister het,” sê Hermione minagtend.

Harry ignoreer haar. Hy het so pas afgekom op 'n inkantasie (*Sectumsempra!*) wat in 'n kantlyn gekrabbel is bokant die prikkelende woorde “Vir Vyande” en hy jeuk om dit op die proef te stel, maar besluit dit is dalk beter om dit nie voor Hermione te doen nie. Pleks daarvan vou hy die hoek van die bladsy stilletjies om.

Hulle sit voor die vuur in die geselskamer; die enigste ander mense wat nog op is, is medesesdejaars. Almal was baie opgewonde toe hulle vroeër van aandete af terugkom en 'n nuwe kennisgewing op die bord ontdek wat die datum vir hul Appareringstoets aankondig. Diegene wat op of voor die eerste toetsdatum, die een-en-twintigste April, sewentien sal wees, het die opsie om in te skryf vir ekstra oefensessies wat (onder streng toesig) in Hogsmeade sal plaasvind.

Ron was dadelik paniekerig toe hy hierdie kennisgewing lees; hy het dit nog steeds nie reggekry om te Appareer nie en is bang hy gaan nie gereed wees vir die toets nie. Hermione, wat nou al twee keer daarin geslaag het om te Appareer, is 'n bietjie meer selfversekerd, maar Harry word eers oor vier maande sewentien en kan daarom nie die toets aflê nie, gereed ofte nie.

“Maar jy kan ten minste Appareer!” sê Ron gespanne. “Jy gaan nie in Julie sukkel nie!”

“Ek het dit nog net een keer gedoen,” herinner Harry hom; hy het dit tydens hul laaste les uiteindelik reggekry om te verdwyn en weer binne sy hoepel te materialiseer.

Nadat hy hoeveel tyd gemors het deur hardop oor Apparering te wroeg, swoeg Ron nou met 'n geweldig moeilike opstel vir Snape waarmee Harry en Hermione al klaar is. Harry is heeltemal daarop voorbereid dat hy lae punte hiervoor gaan kry, want hy verskil van Snape oor wat die beste manier is om Dementors te takel, maar hy gee nie om nie: Slughorn se herinnering is nou vir hom die belangrikste van alles.

“Ek sê jou, die simpel Prins sal jou nie daarmee kan help nie, Harry!” sê Hermione nóg harder. “Daar is net een manier om iemand te dwing om te doen wat jy wil hê en dis die Imperiusvloek, wat onwettig is –”

“Ja, ek weet dit, dankie,” sê Harry en kyk nie eens van die boek af op nie. “Dis hoekom ek iets anders soek. Dumbledore sê Veritaserum sal nie werk nie, maar daar is dalk iets anders, 'n towerspreuk of 'n drankie ...”

“Jy benader dit verkeerd,” sê Hermione. “Dumbledore sê net jy kan die herinnering by hom kry. So dit beteken jy kan Slughorn oortuig op 'n manier wat ander mense nie kan nie. Dis nie 'n kwessie van vir hom 'n towerdrankie ingee nie; enigiemand kan dit doen –”

“Hoe spel mens ‘vreedsaam?’” vra Ron. Hy skud sy veeperpen hard en staar na sy perkament. “Dit kan nie V – R – E – E – T wees nie.”

“Nee, dit is nie,” sê Hermione en trek Ron se opstel nader. “En ‘betower’ is ook nie beT – J – O – I – N – G – S nie. Watse soort veeperpen gebruik jy?”

“Dis een van Fred en George se Self-Spelpenne ... maar ek dink dis besig om sy toorkrag te verloor ...”

“Moet wees,” sê Hermione en wys na sy opstel se titel, “want ons is gevra hoe jy Dementors sal trotseer, nie ‘Dommentorre’ nie, en ek kan nie onthou dat jy jou naam na ‘Rotnaald Weselesel’ verander het nie.”

“Agge nee!” sê Ron en staar met afgryse na die perkament. “Moenie vir my sê ek moet die hele ding weer oorskryf nie!”

“Dis oukei; ons kan dit regmaak,” sê Hermione en haal haar towerstaf uit.

“Ek is mal oor jou, Hermione” sê Ron en sink terug in sy stoel terwyl hy sy oë moeg vryf.

Hermione word effens pienk in die gesig, maar sê net: “Moenie dat Lavender jou dit hoor sê nie.”

“Ek sal nie,” sê Ron in sy hande. “Of miskien moet ek ... Dan sal sy my afsê ...”

“Hoekom sê jy haar nie af as jy moeg is vir haar nie?” vra Harry.

“Jy’t nog nooit iemand afgesê nie, het jy?” vra Ron. “Jy en Cho het net –”

“Soort van uitmekaar gedryf, ja,” sê Harry.

“Wens dit wil met my en Lavender ook gebeur,” sê Ron droewig terwyl hy kyk hoe Hermione elkeen van sy verkeerd gespelde woorde in stilte met haar towerstaf aanraak en hulle hulself op die perkament regmaak. “Maar hoe meer ek skimp dat ek haar wil los, hoe meer klou sy aan my vas. Dis soos om met ’n reuseseeakat uit te gaan.”

“Daar’s hy,” sê Hermione omtrent twintig minute later en gee Ron se opstel vir hom terug.

“Duisende dankies,” sê Ron. “Kan ek jou veerpen vir die laaste paragraaf leen?”

Harry het tot dusver nog niks nuttigs tussen die Halfbloed Prins se notas gekry nie en hy kyk om hom rond; hulle drie is die enigstes wat in die geselskamer oorgebly het noudat Seamus al vloekende oor Snape se opstel opgestaan en slaapsaal toe geloop het. Die enigste geluide is die knetterende vuur en die gekrap van Hermione se veerpen soos wat Ron sy slotparagraaf oor die Dementors skryf. Hy maak die Halfbloed Prins se boek toe, gaap en dan –

Klap.

Hermione los ’n gillettjie; Ron mors ink oor sy hele opstel uit en Harry sê: “Skepsel!”

Die huiself buig laag en praat met sy eie knoetselige tone.

“Meester het gesê hy wil gereeld terugvoer hê oor wat die Malfoy-seun doen en daarom is Skepsel hier om –”

Klap.

Dobby verskyn langs Skepsel met sy teemus skeef op sy kop.

“Dobby het ook gehelp, Harry Potter!” piep hy en kyk Skepsel verwytend aan. “En Skepsel moet vir Dobby sê wanneer hy Harry Potter kom sien sodat hulle hul terugvoer sáám vir hom kan gee!”

“Wat is dit dié?” vra Hermione, wat nog steeds aan skok ly omdat hulle so skielik verskyn het. “Wat gaan aan, Harry?”

Harry huiwer voor hy antwoord, want hy het nie vir Hermione vertel hy het Skepsel en Dobby gestuur om Malfoy te agtervolg nie; huiselwe is altyd so ’n netelige kwessie by haar.

“Wel ... hulle het Malfoy vir my agtervolg,” sê hy.

“Dag en nag,” krys Skepsel.

“Dobby het vir ’n hele week nie geslaap nie, Harry Potter!” verklaar Dobby trots en wieg op sy voete.

Hermione lyk verontwaardig.

“Jy het nie geslaap nie, Dobby? Maar Harry, jy’t tog sekerlik nie vir hom gesê om –”

“Nee, natuurlik het ek nie,” sê Harry vinnig. “Dobby, jy mag maar slaap, hoor? Maar het een van julle iets uitgevind?” vra hy haastig voor Hermione weer tussenbeide kan kom.

“Meester Malfoy beweeg soos wat dit ’n suiwerbloed adellike betaam,” kwaak Skepsel dadelik. “Sy gelaatstrekke herinner my aan my meesteres se fynbesnede beenstruktuur en hy tree op soos –”

“Draco Malfoy is ’n stout seun!” kap Dobby kwaai teë. “’n Stout seun wat – wat –”

Hy ril van sy teemus se tossel tot by sy sokkies se tone en hardloop na die vuur asof hy daarin gaan spring; Harry was so iets te wagte: hy gryp die huiself om die middel en hou hom vas. Dobby sit hom vir ’n paar sekondes teë en word dan slap.

“Dankie, Harry Potter,” hyg hy. “Dobby sukkel nog steeds om sleg te praat van sy ou meesters ...”

Harry los hom; Dobby trek sy teemus reg en sê dan uitdagend vir Skepsel: “Maar Skepsel moet een ding weet: Draco Malfoy is nie ’n goeie meester vir ’n huiself nie!”

“Ja, en ons wil nie nou weer hoor hoe mal jy oor Malfoy is nie,” sê Harry vir Skepsel. “Kom ons beweeg aan na waarheen hy heeltyd gaan.”

Skepsel buig laag, lyk woedend, en sê dan: “Meester Malfoy eet in die Groot Saal, hy slaap in ’n slaapsaal in die kerkers, hy woon klasse by in die verskillende –”

“Dobby, sê jy vir my,” knip Harry Skepsel kort, “is hy iewers heen waarheen hy nie moes gegaan het nie?”

“Harry Potter, meneer,” piep Dobby en sy groot ronde oë skitter in die vuur se lig, “sover Dobby kon uitvind, oortree die Malfoy-seun geen reëls nie, maar hy maak baie seker hy word nie gesien nie. Hy gaan gereeld saam met ’n verskeidenheid ander studente op na die sewende verdieping toe, en dan staan hulle daar wag terwyl hy ingaan –”

“Die Vertrek van Vereistes!” sê Harry en klap homself hard teen die voorkop met sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerkuns*. Hermione en Ron staar hom aan. “Dis waarheen hy heeltyd wegsluip! Dis waar hy dit doen ... wat hy ook al doen! En ek wed julle dis hoekom hy van die kaart af verdwyn – noudat ek daaraan dink; ek het die Vertrek van Vereistes nog nooit daarop gesien nie!”

“Miskien het die Plunderaars nie geweet die Vertrek is daar nie,” sê Ron.

“Ek dink dis deel van die Vertrek se towerkragte,” sê Hermione. “As jy wil hê dit moet onvindbaar wees, dan sal dit wees.”

“Dobby, kon jy daar inkom en sien wat Malfoy doen?” vra Harry gretig.

“Nee, Harry Potter, dit is onmoontlik,” sê Dobby.

“Nee, dit is nie,” sê Harry dadelik. “Malfoy het laas jaar daar by ons Hoofkwartier ingekom, so ek sal maklik daar kan inkom om op hom te spioeneer.”

“Ek dink nie so nie, Harry,” sê Hermione stadig. “Malfoy het reeds geweet waarvoor ons die Vertrek gebruik, onthou jy, want daai simpel Marietta het ons verklik. Hy wou hê die Vertrek moes die DS se Hoofkwartier word, en toe hét dit. Maar jy weet nie waarin die Vertrek verander wanneer Malfoy daar ingaan nie, so jy weet nie waarin jy dit moet vra om te verander nie.”

“Daar sal ’n manier wees om dit te omseil,” sê Harry seker van sy saak. “Jy’t jou briljant van jou taak gekwyt, Dobby.”

“Skepsel ook,” sê Hermione vriendelik, maar Skepsel lyk alles-behalwe dankbaar; hy laat sak sy yslike bloedbelope oë en krysvir die plafon: “Die Modderbloeder praat met Skepsel. Skepsel sal maak of hy nie hoor nie –”

“Weg is jy!” snou Harry hom toe en Skepsel buig vir oulaas laag en Disappareer. “Jy beter ook loop en slaap gaan inhaal, Dobby.”

“Dankie, Harry Potter, meneer!” kraai Dobby gelukkig en dan verdwyn hy ook.

“Hoe’s dit!” sê Harry entoesiasties vir Ron en Hermione die oomblik dat die elwe weg is. “Ons weet waarheen Malfoy gaan! Ons het hom nou in ’n hoek!”

“Ja, dis wonderlik,” sê Ron suur terwyl hy die ink wat sy byna-klaar opstel totaal deurweek het, probeer opvee. Hermione trek die perkament na haar toe en begin die ink met haar towerstaf opsuig.

“Maar wat is dit van hom wat op soontoe gaan saam met ’n ‘verskeidenheid ander studente?’” sê Hermione. “Hoeveel mense is hierby betrokke? Ek kan nie dink dat hy baie ander sal vertrou om te weet wat hy doen nie ...”

“Ja, dit is vreemd,” sê Harry fronsend. “Ek het gehoor hoe sê hy vir Crabbe dit het niks met hom uit te waai wat hy doen nie ... so wat sê hy vir al daardie ... al daardie ...”

Harry se stem sterf weg; hy staar in die vuur.

“Dêmmitt, ek was onnosel,” sê hy sag. “Dis mos vanselfsprekend, is dit nie? Daar is ’n hele groot vat daarvan onder in die kerker ... Hy kon enige tyd gedurende die klas daarvan gegaps het ...”

“Wat gegaps het?”

“Polisouspaljas. Hy het van die Polisouspaljas wat Slughorn vir ons met ons eerste Towerdrankieklas gewys het, gesteel ... Dis nie ’n klomp verskillende studente wat vir Malfoy wag staan nie ... Dis soos gewoonlik net Crabbe en Goyle ... Ja, dit maak alles sin!” sê Harry terwyl hy opspring en heen en weer voor die vuur begin stap. “Hulle is dom genoeg om te doen wat hy vir hulle sê, selfs al wil hy nie vir hulle sê wat hy in die mou voer nie ... maar hy wil nie hê iemand moet hulle buite die Vertrek van Vereistes sien rondhang nie, so hy laat hulle Polisouspaljas drink om hulle soos ander mense te laat lyk ... Daai twee meisies wat ek by hom gesien het toe hy nie Kwiddiek kom kyk het nie – ha! – dit was Crabbe en Goyle!”

“Bedoel jy,” sê Hermione in ’n fluisterstem, “daai meisie wie se skaal ek reggemaak het, was ook – ?”

“Ja, natuurlik!” sê Harry hard en kyk haar aan. “Natuurlik! Malfoy was natuurlik toe in die Vertrek, so sy – wat praat ek? – hy het die skaal laat val om Malfoy te waarsku dat hy nie moet uitkom nie, want daar’s iemand daar! En dan was daar ook nog daai meisie wat die paddaeiers laat val het! Ons het heeldyd verby hom geloop sonder om dit te besef!”

“Hy het Crabbe en Goyle in meisies verander?” Ron bulder van die lag. “Wow ... g’n wonder hulle lyk deesdae so suur nie ... Ek kan nie glo hulle sê nie vir hom om in sy dinges te vlieg nie ...”

“Wel, hulle sal nie as hy vir hulle sy Donker Merk gewys het nie,” sê Harry.

“Hmmm ... ons weet nie of hy die Donker Merk het nie,” sê Hermione skepties. Sy rol Ron se drooggemaakte opstel op voor dit weer iets kan oorkom en gee dit vir hom.

“Ons sal sien,” sê Harry vol selfvertroue.

“Ja, ons sal,” sê Hermione, wat op die been kom en haar uitrek. “Maar Harry, voor jy té opgewonde raak, ek dink nog steeds nie jy gaan by die Vertrek van Vereistes inkom sonder dat jy eers uitvind wat daarin is nie. En ek wil jou net herinner,” voeg sy by terwyl sy haar sak optel en hom ernstig aankyk, “jy is veronderstel om daarop te konsentreer om Slughorn se herinnering in die hande te kry. Goeienag.”

Harry kyk haar gefrustreerd agterna. Toe die deur na die meisies se slaapsaal agter haar toegaan, draai hy na Ron.

“Wat dink jy?”

“Wens ek kon soos ’n huiself Disappareer,” sê Ron en staar na die plek waar Dobby verdwyn het. “Dan sal ek daai Appareringstoets lag-lag deurkom.”

Daardie nag slaap Harry nie lekker nie. Dit voel of hy ure lank wakker lê en wonder hoe Malfoy die Vertrek van Vereistes gebruik en wat hy wat Harry is, sal sien wanneer hy die volgende dag daar inkom. Want al sê Hermione ook wat, is Harry seker dat as Malfoy die DS se Hoofkwartier kon sien, hy ook sal kan inkom by Malfoy se ... wat kan dit wees? 'n Ontmoetingsplek? 'n Wegkruipplek? 'n Stoorkamer? 'n Werkswinkel? Harry se kop werk koorsagtig en toe hy uiteindelik aan die slaap raak, word sy drome onderbreek en versteur deur beelde van Malfoy wat verander in Slughorn, wat verander in Snape ...

Die volgende oggend met ontbyt is Harry op hete kole; hy het 'n af-periode voor Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste en is vasberade om dan by die Vertrek van Vereistes te probeer inkom. Hermione maak 'n punt daarvan om te wys sy stel nie belang in sy fluister-planne om kom wat wil by die Vertrek in te kom nie en dit irriteer Harry, want hy weet sy kan van groot hulp wees as sy net wil.

“Kyk,” sê hy sag terwyl hy vorentoe leun en sy hand op die *Daaglikse Profeet* sit wat sy nou net by 'n posuul gekry het, om te keer dat sy dit oopmaak en daaragter verdwyn, “ek het nie van Slughorn vergeet nie, maar ek het nie die vaagste benul hoe om die herinnering by hom te kry nie, en tot ek eendag 'n blink plan kry, kan ek mos maar net sowel uitvind wat Malfoy doen.”

“Soos ek al vir jou gesê het, jy moet Slughorn oortuig,” sê Hermione. “Hy kan nie gekul of getoor word nie, anders sou Dumbledore dit binne 'n sekonde gedoen het. Vergeet nou van buite die Vertrek van Vereistes rondhang,” sê sy. Hermione pluk die *Profeet* onder Harry se hand uit en vou dit oop om na die voorblad te kyk. “Jy moet na Slughorn toe gaan en jou op die goeie in hom beroep.”

“Enigiemand wat ons ken – ?” vra Ron terwyl Hermione vinnig na die hoofopskrifte kyk.

“Ja!” sê Hermione en laat Harry en Ron aan hul ontbyt stik, “maar dis oukei; hy's nie dood nie – dis Mundungus; hy's gearresteer en Azkaban toe gestuur! Iets te doen met die naboots van 'n Inferius tydens 'n poging tot inbraak ... en iemand genaamd Octavius Pepper het verdwyn ... o, en hoe aaklig, 'n negejarige seuntjie is gearresteer vir poging tot moord op sy oupa en ouma; hulle dink hy was onder die Imperiusvloek ...”

Hulle eet hul ontbyt in stilte klaar. Dan kry Hermione koers na haar Antieke Runes-klas, Ron loop geselskamer toe, want hy moet nog sy slotparagraaf vir Snape se opstel oor Dementors klaarmaak, en Harry mik na die gang op die sewende verdieping en die stuk

muur oorkant die tapisserie van Barnabus die Belaglike wat vir trolle balletlesse gee.

Harry loop tot in 'n leë gang en glip onder sy Onsigbaarheids-mantel in, maar dit is nie nodig nie, want toe hy by sy bestemming kom, sien hy dit is verlate. Harry is nie seker of sy kanse om by die Vertrek in te kom, beter is met Malfoy daarbinne of -buite nie, maar ten minste gaan sy eerste poging nie bemoeilik word deur die teenwoordigheid van Crabbe of Goyle wat voorgee om 'n elfjarige meisie te wees nie.

Hy maak sy oë toe terwyl hy nader kom aan die plek waar die Vertrek van Vereistes se deur weggesteek is. Hy weet wat hy moet doen; hy was laas jaar al gesout daarin. Hy konsentreer met alle mag en dink *Ek moet sien wat Malfoy hierbinne doen ... Ek moet sien wat Malfoy hierbinne doen ... Ek moet sien wat Malfoy hierbinne doen ...*

Hy loop drie keer verby die deur en dan, terwyl sy hart wild van opwinding klop, maak hy sy oë oop en draai na die deur – maar hy kyk nog steeds net na 'n doodgewone, leë muur.

Hy beweeg vorentoe en probeer daarteen druk. Die klipmuur bly solied en onbeweeglik.

“Oukei,” sê Harry hardop. “Oukei ... Ek het die verkeerde ding gedink ...”

Hy dink vir 'n oomblik en begin dan weer. Sy oë is toe en hy dink so hard as wat hy kan.

Ek moet die plek sien waarheen Malfoy aanhoudend skelmpies kom ... Ek moet die plek sien waarheen Malfoy aanhoudend skelmpies kom ...

Hy loop weer drie keer verby en maak sy oë vol verwagting oop. Daar is nie 'n deur nie.

“Ag, toe nou,” sê hy geïrriteerd vir die muur. “Dit was 'n duidelike instruksie ... Komaan.”

Hy dink 'n hele paar minute diep en begin dan weer.

Ek wil hê jy moet verander in die plek wat jy vir Draco Malfoy word...

Hy maak sy oë nie dadelik oop toe hy klaar op en af geloop het nie; hy luister aandagtig, asof hy sal kan hoor hoe die deur te voorskyn kom. Maar hy hoor niks nie, net die voëltjies wat ver buite iewers kwetter. Hy maak sy oë oop.

Daar is nog steeds nie 'n deur nie.

Harry vloek. Iemand gil. Hy kyk om en sien 'n groepie eerstejaars om die hoek weghardloop, heilig oortuig dat hulle so pas 'n vreeslike vuilbekspook teëgekom het.

Harry probeer 'n hele uur lank elke variasie waaraan hy kan dink van “Ek wil sien wat Draco Malfoy daar binnekant jou doen” en op die ou end moet hy noodgedwonge erken Hermione het dalk 'n punt

beet: die Vertrek wil eenvoudig nie vir hom oopmaak nie. Gefrus-treerd en geïrriteerd kies hy rigting na Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste; hy haal sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel in die loop van hom af en stop dit in sy sak.

“Al weer laat, Potter,” sê Snape kil toe Harry haastig by die kersverligte vertrek inkom. “Minus tien punte vir Gryffindor.”

Harry kyk Snape boos aan terwyl hy op die stoel langs Ron neerval; die helfte van die klas staan nog, besig om hul boeke uit te haal en hul sakke weg te sit; hy kon nie soveel later as hulle gewees het nie.

“Voor ons begin, wil ek julle Dementoropstelle hê,” sê Snape en swaai sy towerstaf onverskillig sodat vyf-en-twintig perkamentrolle in die lug opstyg en in ’n netjiese stapel op sy lessenaar beland. “En ek hoop vir julle onthalwe dit is beter as die louter snert wat ek moes verduur oor hoe om die Imperiusvloek die hoof te bied. Reg, maak almal julle boeke oop op bladsy – Wat is dit, meneer Finnigan?”

“Professor,” sê Seamus, “ek het gewonder: Hoe weet mens wat is die verskil tussen ’n Inferius en ’n spook? Want daar was iets in die Profeet oor ’n Inferius –”

“Nee, daar was nie,” sê Snape in ’n verveelde stem.

“Maar professor, ek het mense hoor praat –”

“As jy die betrokke berig gelees het, meneer Finnigan, sou jy geweet het die sogenaamde Inferius was niks anders nie as ’n stink sluipdief genaamd Mundungus Fletcher.”

“Ek dog Snape en Mundungus is aan dieselfde kant?” mompel Harry vir Ron en Hermione. “Moet hy nie vies wees oor Mundungus gevang is nie – ?”

“Maar Potter het klaarblyklik baie te sê oor die onderwerp,” sê Snape en beduie skielik na agter in die klas met sy swart oë op Harry gerig. “Kom ons vra vir Potter wat is die verskil tussen ’n Inferius en ’n spook.”

Die hele klas kyk om na Harry, wat haastig probeer onthou wat Dumbledore vir hom vertel het die aand toe hulle Slughorn gaan opsoek het.

“E – wel – spoke is deursigtig –” sê hy.

“O, baie goed,” val Snape hom in die rede en sy lip krul op. “Ja-nee, ses jaar van magiese onderwys is duidelik nie op jou vermors nie, Potter. *Spoke is deursigtig.*”

Pansy Parkinson lag effens senuweeagtig. ’n Hele paar ander mense grinnik. Harry haal diep asem en gaan kalm aan, al kook hy van binne. “Ja, spoke is deursigtig, maar Inferi is dooie liggame, nie waar nie? So hulle is solied –”

“’n Vyfjarige sal dit vir jou kan sê,” snou Snape hom toe. “’n Inferius is ’n lyk waarin ’n Donker towenaar met spesiale tower-spreuke weer lewe blaas. Die lyk lewe nie werklik nie; dit is bloot ’n marionet wat die towenaar se bevele uitvoer. ’n Spook, en ek hoop julle is almal teen hierdie tyd al bewus daarvan, is die afdruk wat ’n gestorwe siel op aarde agterlaat ... en natuurlik, soos wat Potter in sy wysheid vir ons vertel het, is ’n spook *deursigtig*.”

“Wel, wat Harry gesê het, sal mens die meeste help om die twee uitmekaar te ken!” sê Ron. “As mens jou iewers in ’n donker stegie in een vasloop, kan jy kyk of die ding solied is; jy gaan nie vir hom sê: ‘Ekskuus tog, is jy ’n gestorwe siel se afdruk’ nie.”

Daar is ’n gegiggel wat dadelik ophou toe die klas sien hoe Snape hulle aangluur.

“Nog tien punte af van Gryffindor,” sê Snape. “’n Mens kan niks meer gesofistikeerd van hom verwag nie: Ronald Weasley, die seun wat so solied is dat hy nie ’n halfduim oor die vertrek kan Appareer nie.”

“*Neel!*” fluister Hermione en gryp Harry aan die arm toe hy sy mond woedend oopmaak. “Dis nutteloos; hy gaan net weer vir jou detensie gee. Los dit!”

“Maak nou julle boeke oop op bladsy tweehonderd en dertien,” sê Snape met ’n effense grynsag “en lees die eerste twee paragrawe oor die Cruciatusvloek ...”

Ron is vir die duur van die klas baie stil. Toe die klok uiteindelik lui, sluit Lavender aan by Ron en Harry (Hermione het geheimsinnig uit sig verdwyn toe sy nader kom) en vaar uit teen Snape en sy spot-tende opmerking oor Ron se Apparering, maar dit irriteer Ron net en hy skud haar af deur saam met Harry by die seuns se kleedkamer in te gaan.

“Maar Snape is reg, nè?” sê Ron ná hy vir ’n minuut of twee in ’n gekraakte spieël gestaan en staar het. “Ek weet nie of dit die moeite werd is om die toets te doen nie. Ek kry dit net nie reg om te Appareer nie.”

“Gaan vir die ekstra oefensessies in Hogsmeade en kyk of dit jou help,” stel Harry voor. “Dit sal in elk geval interessanter wees as om in ’n simpel hoepel te probeer beland. En dan, as jy nog steeds nie – jy weet – so goed is soos wat jy wil wees nie, kan jy die toets uitstel en dit saam met my doen in die some – Myrtle, dis die ouens se kleedkamer dié!”

Die spook van ’n meisie het uit die toilet in ’n hokkie agter hulle opgestyg en sweef nou in die lug terwyl sy hulle deur haar dik, wit, ronde bril aanstaar.

“O,” sê sy bedruk. “Dis julle twee.”

“Wie het jy verwag?” vra Ron en kyk vir haar in die spieël.

“Niemand nie,” sê Myrtle en voel vies aan ’n puisie op haar ken.

“Hy’t gesê hy sal terugkom en vir my kom haai sê, maar nou ja, *julle* het ook gesê julle sal kastig vir my kom kuier ...” sê sy met ’n verwyttende kyk na Harry, “... en ek het julle maande laas gesien. Ek het geleer om nie te veel van seuns te verwag nie.”

“Ek dog jy bly in die meisies se kleedkamer?” sê Harry, wat nou al vir ’n jaar of wat wye draaie om daardie plek loop.

“Ek bly daar, ja,” sê sy en haal haar skouers dikmond op, “maar dit beteken nie ek kan nie op ander plekke gaan *kuier* nie. Ek het eenkeer vir jou in jou bad kom hallo sê, onthou jy?”

“Ja, baie goed,” sê Harry.

“Maar ek het gedog hy hou van my,” sê sy kermend. “Miskien moet julle twee loop; dalk kom hy dan ... Ons is baie dieselfde ... Ek is seker hy’t dit ook aangevoel ...”

En sy kyk hoopvol deur se kant toe.

“Wanneer jy sê julle is baie dieselfde,” sê Ron en klink nou baie geamuseerd, “bedoel jy hy bly ook in ’n rioolpyp?”

“Nee,” sê Myrtle uitdagend en haar stem eggo hard deur die ou, geteelde kleedkamer. “Ek bedoel hy’s sensitief, mense boelie hom ook en hy voel eensaam en hy’t niemand om mee te praat nie, en hy’s nie bang om sy gevoelens te wys en te huil nie!”

“Was daar ’n ou hier wat gehuil het?” vra Harry versigtig. “’n Jong seun?”

“Traak jou nie!” sê Myrtle met haar klein, betraande ogies op Ron, wat nou definitief grinnik. “Ek het belowe ek sal vir niemand sê nie; ek neem sy geheim saam met my na –”

“– tog seker nie na jou graf toe nie?” sê Ron en snork van die lag. “Die riole miskien ...”

Myrtle weeklaag woedend en duik terug in die toilet sodat die water oor die kante spat en op die vloer afloop. Om Myrtle se siel so uit te trek, het Ron blykbaar nuwe moed gegee.

“Jy’s reg,” sê hy en swaai sy skoolsak weer oor sy skouer, “ek gaan eers die oefensessies in Hogsmeade doen voor ek oor die toets besluit.”

Daardie naweek sluit Ron dus aan by Hermione en die res van die sesdejaars wat betyds sewentien gaan word om oor twee weke vir die toets te kwalifiseer. Harry is nogal jaloers toe hy hulle sien regmaak om af dorp toe te gaan; hy mis hul uitstappies soontoe en dit is ’n pragtige lentedag, een van die eerste dae in ’n lang tyd dat die lug mooi skoon is. Maar Harry het besluit om die tyd te gebruik om weer by die Vertrek van Vereistes te probeer inkom.

“Los dit liever,” sê Hermione toe hy vir haar en Ron in die Ingangsportaal van sy plan vertel. “Jy beter reguit na Slughorn se kantoor toe gaan en daai herinnering by hom probeer kry.”

“Ek probeer heeltyd!” sê Harry vies, en dit is waar. Hy het die afgelope week elke keer ná ’n Towerdrankieklas agtergebly in ’n poging om Slughorn vas te pen, maar die Towerdrankiemeester het elke keer by die kerker uitgeglimp voor Harry hom kon voorkeer. Harry het twee keer aan sy kantoordeur gaan klop, maar niemand het geantwoord nie, al was hy die tweede keer seker hy hoor hoe ’n ou grammofoon haastig afgesit word.

“Hy wil nie met my praat nie, Hermione! Hy weet ek probeer hom weer op sy eie iewers vaspen en hy gaan nie toelaat dat dit gebeur nie!”

“Wel, jy moet net aanhou probeer.”

Die kort ry mense wat wag dat Filch hulle soos gewoonlik met sy Soeksensors moet deursoek, beweeg ’n paar tree vorentoe en Harry antwoord nie, ingeval die opsigter hom hoor. Hy wens Ron en Hermione voorspoed toe, draai dan om en loop weer met die marmertap op, vasberade om, al sê Hermione ook wat, ’n uur of twee aan die Vertrek van Vereistes af te staan.

Die oomblik dat hy buite sig van die Ingangsportaal is, haal Harry die Plunderaar se Kaart en sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel uit sy sak. Hy versteek homself, tik dan op die kaart en mompel: “Ek belowe plegtig dat ek niks goeds beoog nie” en bestudeer dit sorgvuldig.

Dit is ’n Sondagoggend, so byna al die studente is in hul onderskeie geselskamers, die Gryffindors in een toring, die Raweklouers in ’n ander een, die Slytherins in die kerkers en die Hoesenproesers in die kelder naby die kombuise. Hier en daar beweeg iemand alleen in die biblioteek rond of stap in ’n gang af ... Daar is ’n paar mense buite op die skoolgrond ... en daar, alleen in die sewende verdieping se gang, is Gregory Goyle. Daar is nie ’n teken van die Vertrek van Vereistes nie, maar Harry gee nie om nie; as Goyle daarbuite wag staan, beteken dit die Vertrek is oop, of die kaart nou daarvan bewus is of nie. Harry hardloop haastig by die trap op tot waar hy by die gang moet indraai; dan beweeg hy stadig en versigtig tot by dieselfde meisietjie met die swaar koperskaal wat Hermione twee weke gelede so vriendelik reggemaak het. Hy wag tot hy reg agter haar is voor hy laag afbuk en fluister: “Hallo ... Jy’s baie mooi.”

Goyle gil van skrik, gooi die skaal in die lug op en hardloop weg; hy verdwyn uit sig lank voor die klank van die skaal wat gebreek het deur die gang ophou eggo. Met ’n glimlag draai Harry om en bekijk die leë muur agter hom waar hy seker is Draco Malfoy nou vasgenael

staan, wetende dat iemand onwelkom hier buite is en te bang om sy gesig te wys. Dit gee Harry 'n heerlike gevoel van mag terwyl hy probeer onthou watter formulering van woorde hy nog nie probeer het nie.

Maar sy optimisme is van korte duur. 'n Halfuur later, nadat hy talle ander variasies probeer het op sy versoek om te sien wat Malfoy doen, is die muur nog steeds net so deurloos soos altyd. Harry voel ongelooflik gefrustreerd; Malfoy staan dalk net 'n voet of twee van hom af en hy het nog steeds nie die geringste leidraad oor wat die vent daarbinne aanvang nie. Harry se geduld is nou heeltemal op; hy mik vir die muur en skop hard daarteen.

“AU!”

Hy is seker sy toon is gebreek; terwyl hy dit vashou en een-beentjie rondspring, glip die Onsigbaarheidsmantel van hom af.

“Harry?”

Hy swaai om op een been en val. Daar, tot sy absolute verstomming, kom Tonks na hom toe aangestap asof sy gereeld deur hierdie gang loop.

“Wat doen jy hier?” vra hy terwyl hy opstaan; hoekom moet sy hom altyd plat op sy rug iewers aantref?

“Ek het vir Dumbledore kom sien,” sê Tonks.

Harry dink sy lyk verskriklik; sy is maerder as gewoonlik en haar muiskleurige hare steil.

“Sy kantoor is nie hier nie,” sê Harry. “Dis aan die ander kant van die kasteel, agter die drakekop –”

“Ek weet,” sê Tonks. “Hy's nie daar nie. Blykbaar is hy weer weg.”

“O,” sê Harry en sit sy beseerde voet versigtig op die vloer neer. “Hei – jy weet nie dalk waarheen hy so weggaan nie?”

“Nee,” sê Tonks.

“Waaroor wou jy hom sien?”

“Niks spesifieks nie,” sê Tonks, wat skynbaar onbewus is daarvan dat sy heeltyd aan haar kleed se mou trek. “Ek dog maar net hy weet dalk wat aangaan ... Ek het stories gehoor ... mense wat seergekry het ...”

“Ja, ek weet; dit was in die koerante,” sê Harry. “Daai seuntjie wat sy oupa en ouma probeer vermoor het –”

“Die *Profeet* is dikwels laat met hul berigte,” sê Tonks, wat nie lyk of sy na hom luister nie. “Het jy onlangs enige briewe van enigemand in die Orde gekry?”

“Niemand van die Orde skryf meer vir my nie,” sê Harry, “nie vandat Sirius –”

Hy sien hoe haar oë vol trane skiet.

“Ek’s jammer,” mompel hy ongemaklik. “Ek bedoel ... Ek mis hom ook ...”

“Wat?” sê Tonks uitdrukkingloos asof sy hom nie gehoor het nie. “Wel ... sien jou weer, Harry ...”

En sy draai net daar om en loop terug met die gang af terwyl Harry haar agterna staar. Ná ’n minuut of wat trek hy die Onsigbaarheidsmantel weer oor hom en probeer opnuut by die Vertrek van Vereistes inkom, maar sy pogings is nou halfhartig. Uiteindelik laat die hol kol op sy maag en die wete dat Ron en Hermione binnekort terug sal wees vir middagete hom moed opgee. Harry laat die gang oor aan Malfoy, wat hopelik nog vir ’n hele paar uur te bang sal wees om uit te kom.

Hy kry Ron en Hermione in die Groot Saal; hulle is al halfpad deur ’n vroeë middagete.

“Ek het dit reggekry – wel, soort van!” sê Ron opgewonde toe hy Harry sien. “Ek was veronderstel om buite Madame Puddifoot se teekamer te Appareer en ek het bietjie te ver gemik, toe beland ek doer naby Scrivenshaft, maar ek het ten minste beweeg!”

“Mooi so,” sê Harry. “En hoe’t dit met jou gegaan, Hermione?”

“O, sy het natuurlik weer alles perfek gedoen,” sê Ron voor Hermione kan antwoord. “Perfekste deliberasie, divinasie en desperasie of wat de hel dit ook al is – ons het almal ná die tyd gou iets by die Drie Besemstokke gaan drink en jy moes hoor hoe gaan Twycross te kere oor haar – wed jou hy gaan haar binnekort vra om met hom te trou –”

“En wat van jou?” vra Hermione en ignoreer Ron. “Was jy heeltyd bo by die Vertrek van Vereistes?”

“Jip,” sê Harry, “en raai wie’t ek daar raakgeloop? Tonks!”

“Tonks?” herhaal Ron en Hermione gelyk, albei ewe verbaas.

“Ja, sy’t gesê sy kom vir Dumbledore sien ...”

“As jy my vra,” sê Ron ná Harry vir hulle beskryf het hoe sleg sy lyk, “is Tonks besig om in te konk. Sy’s net nie meer haarself ná wat by die Ministerie gebeur het nie.”

“Dis eienaardig,” sê Hermione, wat om die een of ander rede baie bekommerd lyk. “Sy’s veronderstel om die skool op te pas, so hoekom verlaat sy dan haar pos om Dumbledore te kom sien as hy nie eens hier is nie?”

“Ek het gewonder,” sê Harry versigtig. Dit voel vir hom vreemd om dit te sê; sulke dinge is baie meer Hermione se gebied as syne. “Dink jy nie sy was dalk ... jy weet ... verlief op Sirius nie?”

Hermione gaap hom aan.

“Wat op aarde laat jou só sê?”

“Ek weet nie,” sê Harry en haal sy skouers op, “maar sy het amper

begin huil toe ek sy naam noem ... en haar Patronus is nou 'n groot vierbeending ... Ek het gedink, miskien het dit nou verander ... jy weet ... in hom."

"Kan wees," sê Hermione stadig, "maar ek verstaan nog steeds nie hoekom sy by die kasteel inkom om Dumbledore te sien nie. As dit ooit regtig die rede is hoekom sy hier was ...?"

"Dit bring ons terug by wat ek gesê het," kom Ron tussenbeide terwyl hy sy mond vol kapokaartappel stop. "Sy's bietjie affurig. Nie meer haarself nie. Vroumense," sê hy wys vir Harry, "raak maklik gegooi."

"En nogtans," sê Hermione wat diep aan die dink was, "twyfel ek of 'n vroumens vir 'n halfuur dikmond sal wees omdat Madame Rosmerta nie gelag het vir haar grappie oor die viswyf, die Geneser en die *Mimulus mibletonia* nie."

Ron frons vies.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



AFTER THE BURIAL

Patches of bright blue sky were beginning to appear over the castle turrets, but these signs of approaching summer did not lift Harry's mood. He had been thwarted, both in his attempts to find out what Malfoy was doing, and in his efforts to start a conversation with Slughorn that might lead, somehow, to Slughorn handing over the memory he had apparently suppressed for decades.

"For the last time, just forget about Malfoy," Hermione told Harry firmly.

They were sitting with Ron in a sunny corner of the courtyard after lunch. Hermione and Ron were both clutching a Ministry of Magic leaflet — *Common Apparition Mistakes and How to Avoid Them* — for they were taking their tests that very afternoon, but by and large the leaflets had not proved soothing to the nerves.

Ron gave a start and tried to hide behind Hermione as a girl came around the corner.

“It isn’t Lavender,” said Hermione wearily.

“Oh, good,” said Ron, relaxing.

“Harry Potter?” said the girl. “I was asked to give you this.”

“Thanks . . .”

Harry’s heart sank as he took the small scroll of parchment. Once the girl was out of earshot he said, “Dumbledore said we wouldn’t be having any more lessons until I got the memory!”

“Maybe he wants to check on how you’re doing?” suggested Hermione, as Harry unrolled the parchment; but rather than finding Dumbledore’s long, narrow, slanted writing he saw an untidy sprawl, very difficult to read due to the presence of large blotches on the parchment where the ink had run.

Dear Harry, Ron, and Hermione,

Aragog died last night. Harry and Ron, you met him, and you know how special he was. Hermione, I know you’d have liked him. It would mean a lot to me if you’d nip down for the burial later this evening. I’m planning on doing it round dusk, that was his favorite time of day. I know you’re not supposed to be out that late, but you can use the cloak. Wouldn’t ask, but I can’t face it alone.

Hagrid

“Look at this,” said Harry, handing the note to Hermione.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” she said, scanning it quickly and passing it to Ron, who read it through looking increasingly incredulous.

“He’s *mental*!” he said furiously. “That thing told its mates to eat Harry and me! Told them to help themselves! And now Hagrid expects us to go down there and cry over its horrible hairy body!”

“It’s not just that,” said Hermione. “He’s asking us to leave the castle at night and he knows security’s a million times tighter and how much trouble we’d be in if we were caught.”

“We’ve been down to see him by night before,” said Harry.

“Yes, but for something like this?” said Hermione. “We’ve risked a lot to help Hagrid out, but after all — Aragog’s dead. If it were a question of saving him —”

“— I’d want to go even less,” said Ron firmly. “You didn’t meet him, Hermione. Believe me, being dead will have improved him a lot.”

Harry took the note back and stared down at all the inky blotches all over it. Tears had clearly fallen thick and fast upon the parchment. . . .

“Harry, you *can’t* be thinking of going,” said Hermione. “It’s such a pointless thing to get detention for.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “I s’pose Hagrid’ll have to bury Aragog without us.”

“Yes, he will,” said Hermione, looking relieved. “Look, Potions will be almost empty this afternoon, with us all off doing our tests. . . . Try and soften Slughorn up a bit then!”

“Fifty-seventh time lucky, you think?” said Harry bitterly.

“Lucky,” said Ron suddenly. “Harry, that’s it — get lucky!”

“What d’you mean?”

“Use your lucky potion!”

“Ron, that’s — that’s it!” said Hermione, sounding stunned. “Of course! Why didn’t I think of it?”

Harry stared at them both. “Felix Felicis?” he said. “I dunno . . . I was sort of saving it. . . .”

“What for?” demanded Ron incredulously.

“What on earth is more important than this memory, Harry?” asked Hermione.

Harry did not answer. The thought of that little golden bottle had hovered on the edges of his imagination for some time; vague and unformulated plans that involved Ginny splitting up with Dean, and Ron somehow being happy to see her with a new boyfriend, had been fermenting in the depths of his brain, unacknowledged except during dreams or the twilight time between sleeping and waking. . . .

“Harry? Are you still with us?” asked Hermione.

“Wha — ? Yeah, of course,” he said, pulling himself together. “Well . . . okay. If I can’t get Slughorn to talk this afternoon, I’ll take some Felix and have another go this evening.”

“That’s decided, then,” said Hermione briskly, getting to her feet and performing a graceful pirouette. “Destination . . . determination . . . deliberation . . .” she murmured.

“Oh, stop that,” Ron begged her, “I feel sick enough as it is — quick, hide me!”

“It isn’t Lavender!” said Hermione impatiently, as another couple of girls appeared in the courtyard and Ron dived behind her.

“Cool,” said Ron, peering over Hermione’s shoulder to check. “Blimey, they don’t look happy, do they?”

“They’re the Montgomery sisters and of course they don’t look happy, didn’t you hear what happened to their little brother?” said Hermione.

“I’m losing track of what’s happening to everyone’s relatives, to be honest,” said Ron.

“Well, their brother was attacked by a werewolf. The rumor is that their mother refused to help the Death Eaters. Anyway, the boy was only five and he died in St. Mungo’s, they couldn’t save him.”

“He died?” repeated Harry, shocked. “But surely werewolves don’t kill, they just turn you into one of them?”

“They sometimes kill,” said Ron, who looked unusually grave now. “I’ve heard of it happening when the werewolf gets carried away.”

“What was the werewolf’s name?” said Harry quickly.

“Well, the rumor is that it was that Fenrir Greyback,” said Hermione.

“I knew it — the maniac who likes attacking kids, the one Lupin told me about!” said Harry angrily.

Hermione looked at him bleakly.

“Harry, you’ve got to get that memory,” she said. “It’s all about stopping Voldemort, isn’t it? These dreadful things that are happening are all down to him. . . .”

The bell rang overhead in the castle and both Hermione and Ron jumped to their feet, looking terrified.

“You’ll do fine,” Harry told them both, as they headed toward the

entrance hall to meet the rest of the people taking their Apparition Test. “Good luck.”

“And you too!” said Hermione with a significant look, as Harry headed off to the dungeons.

There were only three of them in Potions that afternoon: Harry, Ernie, and Draco Malfoy.

“All too young to Apparate just yet?” said Slughorn genially. “Not turned seventeen yet?”

They shook their heads.

“Ah well,” said Slughorn cheerily, “as we’re so few, we’ll do something *fun*. I want you all to brew me up something amusing!”

“That sounds good, sir,” said Ernie sycophantically, rubbing his hands together. Malfoy, on the other hand, did not crack a smile.

“What do you mean, ‘something amusing’?” he said irritably.

“Oh, surprise me,” said Slughorn airily.

Malfoy opened his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* with a sulky expression. It could not have been plainer that he thought this lesson was a waste of time. Undoubtedly, Harry thought, watching him over the top of his own book, Malfoy was begrudging the time he could otherwise be spending in the Room of Requirement.

Was it his imagination, or did Malfoy, like Tonks, look thinner? Certainly he looked paler; his skin still had that grayish tinge, probably because he so rarely saw daylight these days. But there was no air of smugness, excitement, or superiority; none of the swagger that he had had on the Hogwarts Express, when he had boasted openly of the mission he had been given by Voldemort. . . . There could be only one conclusion, in Harry’s opinion: The mission,

whatever it was, was going badly.

Cheered by this thought, Harry skimmed through his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* and found a heavily corrected Half-Blood Prince's version of "An Elixir to Induce Euphoria," which seemed not only to meet Slughorn's instructions, but which might (Harry's heart leapt as the thought struck him) put Slughorn into such a good mood that he would be prepared to hand over that memory if Harry could persuade him to taste some. . . .

"Well, now, this looks absolutely wonderful," said Slughorn an hour and a half later, clapping his hands together as he stared down into the sunshine yellow contents of Harry's cauldron. "*Euphoria*, I take it? And what's that I smell? Mmmm . . . you've added just a sprig of peppermint, haven't you? Unorthodox, but what a stroke of inspiration, Harry, of course, that would tend to counterbalance the occasional side effects of excessive singing and nose-tweaking. . . . I really don't know where you get these brain waves, my boy . . . unless —"

Harry pushed the Half-Blood Prince's book deeper into his bag with his foot.

"— it's just your mother's genes coming out in you!"

"Oh . . . yeah, maybe," said Harry, relieved.

Ernie was looking rather grumpy; determined to outshine Harry for once, he had most rashly invented his own potion, which had curdled and formed a kind of purple dumpling at the bottom of his cauldron. Malfoy was already packing up, sour-faced; Slughorn had pronounced his Hiccuping Solution merely "passable."

The bell rang and both Ernie and Malfoy left at once.

“Sir,” Harry began, but Slughorn immediately glanced over his shoulder; when he saw that the room was empty but for himself and Harry, he hurried away as fast as he could.

“Professor — Professor, don’t you want to taste my po — ?” called Harry desperately.

But Slughorn had gone. Disappointed, Harry emptied the cauldron, packed up his things, left the dungeon, and walked slowly back upstairs to the common room.

Ron and Hermione returned in the late afternoon.

“Harry!” cried Hermione as she climbed through the portrait hole. “Harry, I passed!”

“Well done!” he said. “And Ron?”

“He — he *just* failed,” whispered Hermione, as Ron came slouching into the room looking most morose. “It was really unlucky, a tiny thing, the examiner just spotted that he’d left half an eyebrow behind. . . . How did it go with Slughorn?”

“No joy,” said Harry, as Ron joined them. “Bad luck, mate, but you’ll pass next time — we can take it together.”

“Yeah, I s’pose,” said Ron grumpily. “But *half an eyebrow*! Like that matters!”

“I know,” said Hermione soothingly, “it does seem really harsh. . . .”

They spent most of their dinner roundly abusing the Apparition examiner, and Ron looked fractionally more cheerful by the time they set off back to the common room, now discussing the continuing problem of Slughorn and the memory.

“So, Harry — you going to use the Felix Felicis or what?” Ron

demanded.

“Yeah, I s’pose I’d better,” said Harry. “I don’t reckon I’ll need all of it, not twelve hours’ worth, it can’t take all night. . . . I’ll just take a mouthful. Two or three hours should do it.”

“It’s a great feeling when you take it,” said Ron reminiscently. “Like you can’t do anything wrong.”

“What are you talking about?” said Hermione, laughing. “You’ve never taken any!”

“Yeah, but I *thought* I had, didn’t I?” said Ron, as though explaining the obvious. “Same difference really . . .”

As they had only just seen Slughorn enter the Great Hall and knew that he liked to take time over meals, they lingered for a while in the common room, the plan being that Harry should go to Slughorn’s office once the teacher had had time to get back there. When the sun had sunk to the level of the treetops in the Forbidden Forest, they decided the moment had come, and after checking carefully that Neville, Dean, and Seamus were all in the common room, sneaked up to the boys’ dormitory.

Harry took out the rolled-up socks at the bottom of his trunk and extracted the tiny, gleaming bottle.

“Well, here goes,” said Harry, and he raised the little bottle and took a carefully measured gulp.

“What does it feel like?” whispered Hermione.

Harry did not answer for a moment. Then, slowly but surely, an exhilarating sense of infinite opportunity stole through him; he felt as though he could have done anything, anything at all . . . and getting the memory from Slughorn seemed suddenly not only possible, but

positively easy. . . .

He got to his feet, smiling, brimming with confidence.

“Excellent,” he said. “Really excellent. Right . . . I’m going down to Hagrid’s.”

“What?” said Ron and Hermione together, looking aghast.

“No, Harry — you’ve got to go and see Slughorn, remember?” said Hermione.

“No,” said Harry confidently. “I’m going to Hagrid’s, I’ve got a good feeling about going to Hagrid’s.”

“You’ve got a good feeling about burying a giant spider?” asked Ron, looking stunned.

“Yeah,” said Harry, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his bag. “I feel like it’s the place to be tonight, you know what I mean?”

“No,” said Ron and Hermione together, both looking positively alarmed now.

“This *is* Felix Felicis, I suppose?” said Hermione anxiously, holding up the bottle to the light. “You haven’t got another little bottle full of — I don’t know —”

“Essence of Insanity?” suggested Ron, as Harry swung his Cloak over his shoulders.

Harry laughed, and Ron and Hermione looked even more alarmed.

“Trust me,” he said. “I know what I’m doing . . . or at least” — he strolled confidently to the door — “Felix does.”

He pulled the Invisibility Cloak over his head and set off down the stairs, Ron and Hermione hurrying along behind him. At the foot of the stairs, Harry slid through the open door.

“What were you doing up there with *her*?” shrieked Lavender Brown, staring right through Harry at Ron and Hermione emerging together from the boys’ dormitories. Harry heard Ron spluttering behind him as he darted across the room away from them.

Getting through the portrait hole was simple; as he approached it, Ginny and Dean came through it, and Harry was able to slip between them. As he did so, he brushed accidentally against Ginny.

“*Don’t* push me, please, Dean,” she said, sounding annoyed. “You’re always doing that, I can get through perfectly well on my own. . . .”

The portrait swung closed behind Harry, but not before he had heard Dean make an angry retort. . . . His feeling of elation increasing, Harry strode off through the castle. He did not have to creep along, for he met nobody on his way, but this did not surprise him in the slightest: This evening, he was the luckiest person at Hogwarts.

Why he knew that going to Hagrid’s was the right thing to do, he had no idea. It was as though the potion was illuminating a few steps of the path at a time: He could not see the final destination, he could not see where Slughorn came in, but he knew that he was going the right way to get that memory. When he reached the entrance hall he saw that Filch had forgotten to lock the front door. Beaming, Harry threw it open and breathed in the smell of clean air and grass for a moment before walking down the steps into the dusk.

It was when he reached the bottom step that it occurred to him how very pleasant it would be to pass the vegetable patch on his walk to Hagrid’s. It was not strictly on the way, but it seemed clear to Harry

that this was a whim on which he should act, so he directed his feet immediately toward the vegetable patch, where he was pleased, but not altogether surprised, to find Professor Slughorn in conversation with Professor Sprout. Harry lurked behind a low stone wall, feeling at peace with the world and listening to their conversation.

“I do thank you for taking the time, Pomona,” Slughorn was saying courteously, “most authorities agree that they are at their most efficacious if picked at twilight.”

“Oh, I quite agree,” said Professor Sprout warmly. “That enough for you?”

“Plenty, plenty,” said Slughorn, who, Harry saw, was carrying an armful of leafy plants. “This should allow for a few leaves for each of my third years, and some to spare if anybody over-stews them. . . . Well, good evening to you, and many thanks again!”

Professor Sprout headed off into the gathering darkness in the direction of her greenhouses, and Slughorn directed his steps to the spot where Harry stood, invisible.

Seized with an immediate desire to reveal himself, Harry pulled off the Cloak with a flourish.

“Good evening, Professor.”

“Merlin’s beard, Harry, you made me jump,” said Slughorn, stopping dead in his tracks and looking wary. “How did you get out of the castle?”

“I think Filch must’ve forgotten to lock the doors,” said Harry cheerfully, and was delighted to see Slughorn scowl.

“I’ll be reporting that man, he’s more concerned about litter than proper security if you ask me. . . . But why are you out here, Harry?”

“Well, sir, it’s Hagrid,” said Harry, who knew that the right thing to do just now was to tell the truth. “He’s pretty upset. . . . But you won’t tell anyone, Professor? I don’t want trouble for him. . . .”

Slughorn’s curiosity was evidently aroused. “Well, I can’t promise that,” he said gruffly. “But I know that Dumbledore trusts Hagrid to the hilt, so I’m sure he can’t be up to anything very dreadful. . . .”

“Well, it’s this giant spider, he’s had it for years. . . . It lived in the forest. . . . It could talk and everything —”

“I heard rumors there were acromantulas in the forest,” said Slughorn softly, looking over at the mass of black trees. “It’s true, then?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “But this one, Aragog, the first one Hagrid ever got, it died last night. He’s devastated. He wants company while he buries it and I said I’d go.”

“Touching, touching,” said Slughorn absentmindedly, his large droopy eyes fixed upon the distant lights of Hagrid’s cabin. “But acromantula venom is very valuable . . . If the beast only just died it might not yet have dried out. . . . Of course, I wouldn’t want to do anything insensitive if Hagrid is upset . . . but if there was any way to procure some . . . I mean, it’s almost impossible to get venom from an acromantula while it’s alive. . . .”

Slughorn seemed to be talking more to himself than Harry now.

“. . . seems an awful waste not to collect it . . . might get a hundred Galleons a pint. . . . To be frank, my salary is not large. . . .”

And now Harry saw clearly what was to be done.

“Well,” he said, with a most convincing hesitancy, “well, if you wanted to come, Professor, Hagrid would probably be really

pleased. . . . Give Aragog a better send-off, you know . . .”

“Yes, of course,” said Slughorn, his eyes now gleaming with enthusiasm. “I tell you what, Harry, I’ll meet you down there with a bottle or two. . . . We’ll drink the poor beast’s — well — not health — but we’ll send it off in style, anyway, once it’s buried. And I’ll change my tie, this one is a little exuberant for the occasion. . . .”

He bustled back into the castle, and Harry sped off to Hagrid’s, delighted with himself.

“Yeh came,” croaked Hagrid, when he opened the door and saw Harry emerging from the Invisibility Cloak in front of him.

“Yeah — Ron and Hermione couldn’t, though,” said Harry. “They’re really sorry.”

“Don’ — don’ matter . . . He’d’ve bin touched yeh’re here, though, Harry. . . .”

Hagrid gave a great sob. He had made himself a black armband out of what looked like a rag dipped in boot polish, and his eyes were puffy, red, and swollen. Harry patted him consolingly on the elbow, which was the highest point of Hagrid he could easily reach.

“Where are we burying him?” he asked. “The forest?”

“Blimey, no,” said Hagrid, wiping his streaming eyes on the bottom of his shirt. “The other spiders won’ let me anywhere near their webs now Aragog’s gone. Turns out it was on’y on his orders they didn’ eat me! Can yeh believe that, Harry?”

The honest answer was “yes”; Harry recalled with painful ease the scene when he and Ron had come face-to-face with the acromantulas: They had been quite clear that Aragog was the only thing that stopped them from eating Hagrid.

“Never bin an area o’ the forest I couldn’ go before!” said Hagrid, shaking his head. “It wasn’ easy, gettin’ Aragog’s body out o’ there, I can tell yeh — they usually eat their dead, see. . . . But I wanted ter give ’im a nice burial . . . a proper send-off . . .”

He broke into sobs again and Harry resumed the patting of his elbow, saying as he did so (for the potion seemed to indicate that it was the right thing to do), “Professor Slughorn met me coming down here, Hagrid.”

“Not in trouble, are yeh?” said Hagrid, looking up, alarmed. “Yeh shouldn’ be outta the castle in the evenin’, I know it, it’s my fault —”

“No, no, when he heard what I was doing he said he’d like to come and pay his last respects to Aragog too,” said Harry. “He’s gone to change into something more suitable, I think . . . and he said he’d bring some bottles so we can drink to Aragog’s memory. . . .”

“Did he?” said Hagrid, looking both astonished and touched. “Tha’s — tha’s righ’ nice of him, that is, an’ not turnin’ yeh in either. I’ve never really had a lot ter do with Horace Slughorn before. . . . Comin’ ter see old Aragog off, though, eh? Well . . . he’d’ve liked that, Aragog would. . . .”

Harry thought privately that what Aragog would have liked most about Slughorn was the ample amount of edible flesh he provided, but he merely moved to the rear window of Hagrid’s hut, where he saw the rather horrible sight of the enormous dead spider lying on its back outside, its legs curled and tangled.

“Are we going to bury him here, Hagrid, in your garden?”

“Jus’ beyond the pumpkin patch, I thought,” said Hagrid in a choked voice. “I’ve already dug the — yeh know — grave. Jus’

thought we'd say a few nice things over him — happy memories, yeh know —”

His voice quivered and broke. There was a knock on the door, and he turned to answer it, blowing his nose on his great spotted handkerchief as he did so. Slughorn hurried over the threshold, several bottles in his arms, and wearing a somber black cravat.

“Hagrid,” he said, in a deep, grave voice. “So very sorry to hear of your loss.”

“Tha’s very nice of yeh,” said Hagrid. “Thanks a lot. An’ thanks fer not givin’ Harry detention neither. . . .”

“Wouldn’t have dreamed of it,” said Slughorn. “Sad night, sad night . . . Where is the poor creature?”

“Out here,” said Hagrid in a shaking voice. “Shall we — shall we do it, then?”

The three of them stepped out into the back garden. The moon was glistening palely through the trees now, and its rays mingled with the light spilling from Hagrid’s window to illuminate Aragog’s body lying on the edge of a massive pit beside a ten-foot-high mound of freshly dug earth.

“Magnificent,” said Slughorn, approaching the spider’s head, where eight milky eyes stared blankly at the sky and two huge, curved pincers shone, motionless, in the moonlight. Harry thought he heard the tinkle of bottles as Slughorn bent over the pincers, apparently examining the enormous hairy head.

“It’s not ev’ryone appreciates how beau’iful they are,” said Hagrid to Slughorn’s back, tears leaking from the corners of his crinkled eyes. “I didn’ know yeh were int’rested in creatures like Aragog,

Horace.”

“Interested? My dear Hagrid, I revere them,” said Slughorn, stepping back from the body. Harry saw the glint of a bottle disappear beneath his cloak, though Hagrid, mopping his eyes once more, noticed nothing. “Now . . . shall we proceed to the burial?”

Hagrid nodded and moved forward. He heaved the gigantic spider into his arms and, with an enormous grunt, rolled it into the dark pit. It hit the bottom with a rather horrible, crunchy thud. Hagrid started to cry again.

“Of course, it’s difficult for you, who knew him best,” said Slughorn, who like Harry could reach no higher than Hagrid’s elbow, but patted it all the same. “Why don’t I say a few words?”

He must have got a lot of good quality venom from Aragog, Harry thought, for Slughorn wore a satisfied smirk as he stepped up to the rim of the pit and said, in a slow, impressive voice, “Farewell, Aragog, king of arachnids, whose long and faithful friendship those who knew you won’t forget! Though your body will decay, your spirit lingers on in the quiet, web-spun places of your forest home. May your many-eyed descendants ever flourish and your human friends find solace for the loss they have sustained.”

“Tha’ was . . . tha’ was . . . beau’iful!” howled Hagrid, and he collapsed onto the compost heap, crying harder than ever.

“There, there,” said Slughorn, waving his wand so that the huge pile of earth rose up and then fell, with a muffled sort of crash, onto the dead spider, forming a smooth mound. “Let’s get inside and have a drink. Get on his other side, Harry. . . . That’s it. . . . Up you come, Hagrid . . . Well done . . .”

They deposited Hagrid in a chair at the table. Fang, who had been skulking in his basket during the burial, now came padding softly across to them and put his heavy head into Harry's lap as usual. Slughorn uncorked one of the bottles of wine he had brought.

"I have had it *all* tested for poison," he assured Harry, pouring most of the first bottle into one of Hagrid's bucket-sized mugs and handing it to Hagrid. "Had a house-elf taste every bottle after what happened to your poor friend Rupert."

Harry saw, in his mind's eye, the expression on Hermione's face if she ever heard about this abuse of house-elves, and decided never to mention it to her.

"One for Harry . . ." said Slughorn, dividing a second bottle between two mugs, ". . . and one for me. Well" — he raised his mug high — "to Aragog."

"Aragog," said Harry and Hagrid together.

Both Slughorn and Hagrid drank deeply. Harry, however, with the way ahead illuminated for him by Felix Felicis, knew that he must not drink, so he merely pretended to take a gulp and then set the mug back on the table before him.

"I had him from an egg, yeh know," said Hagrid morosely. "Tiny little thing he was when he hatched. 'Bout the size of a Pekingese."

"Sweet," said Slughorn.

"Used ter keep him in a cupboard up at the school until . . . well . . ."

Hagrid's face darkened and Harry knew why: Tom Riddle had contrived to have Hagrid thrown out of school, blamed for opening the Chamber of Secrets. Slughorn, however, did not seem to be

listening; he was looking up at the ceiling, from which a number of brass pots hung, and also a long, silky skein of bright white hair.

“That’s never unicorn hair, Hagrid?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Hagrid indifferently. “Gets pulled out of their tails, they catch it on branches an’ stuff in the forest, yeh know . . .”

“But my dear chap, do you know how much that’s *worth*?”

“I use it fer bindin’ on bandages an’ stuff if a creature gets injured,” said Hagrid, shrugging. “It’s dead useful . . . very strong, see.”

Slughorn took another deep draught from his mug, his eyes moving carefully around the cabin now, looking, Harry knew, for more treasures that he might be able to convert into a plentiful supply of oak-matured mead, crystalized pineapple, and velvet smoking jackets. He refilled Hagrid’s mug and his own, and questioned him about the creatures that lived in the forest these days and how Hagrid was able to look after them all. Hagrid, becoming expansive under the influence of the drink and Slughorn’s flattering interest, stopped mopping his eyes and entered happily into a long explanation of bowtruckle husbandry.

The Felix Felicis gave Harry a little nudge at this point, and he noticed that the supply of drink that Slughorn had brought was running out fast. Harry had not yet managed to bring off the Refilling Charm without saying the incantation aloud, but the idea that he might not be able to do it tonight was laughable: Indeed, Harry grinned to himself as, unnoticed by either Hagrid or Slughorn (now swapping tales of the illegal trade in dragon eggs) he pointed his wand under the table at the emptying bottles and they immediately began to refill.

After an hour or so, Hagrid and Slughorn began making extravagant toasts: to Hogwarts, to Dumbledore, to elf-made wine, and to —

“Harry Potter!” bellowed Hagrid, slopping some of his fourteenth bucket of wine down his chin as he drained it.

“Yes, indeed,” cried Slughorn a little thickly, “Parry Otter, the Chosen Boy Who — well — something of that sort,” he mumbled, and drained his mug too.

Not long after this, Hagrid became tearful again and pressed the whole unicorn tail upon Slughorn, who pocketed it with cries of, “To friendship! To generosity! To ten Galleons a hair!”

And for a while after that, Hagrid and Slughorn were sitting side by side, arms around each other, singing a slow sad song about a dying wizard called Odo.

“Aaargh, the good die young,” muttered Hagrid, slumping low onto the table, a little cross-eyed, while Slughorn continued to warble the refrain. “Me dad was no age ter go . . . nor were yer mum an’ dad, Harry . . .”

Great fat tears oozed out of the corners of Hagrid’s crinkled eyes again; he grasped Harry’s arm and shook it.

“Bes’ wiz and witchard o’ their age I never knew . . . terrible thing . . . terrible thing . . .”

And Odo the hero, they bore him back home

To the place that he’d known as a lad,

sang Slughorn plaintively.

*They laid him to rest with his hat inside out
And his wand snapped in two, which was sad.*

“... terrible,” Hagrid grunted, and his great shaggy head rolled sideways onto his arms and he fell asleep, snoring deeply.

“Sorry,” said Slughorn with a hiccup. “Can’t carry a tune to save my life.”

“Hagrid wasn’t talking about your singing,” said Harry quietly. “He was talking about my mum and dad dying.”

“Oh,” said Slughorn, repressing a large belch. “Oh dear. Yes, that was — was terrible indeed. Terrible ... terrible ...”

He looked quite at a loss for what to say, and resorted to refilling their mugs.

“I don’t — don’t suppose you remember it, Harry?” he asked awkwardly.

“No — well, I was only one when they died,” said Harry, his eyes on the flame of the candle flickering in Hagrid’s heavy snores. “But I’ve found out pretty much what happened since. My dad died first. Did you know that?”

“I — I didn’t,” said Slughorn in a hushed voice.

“Yeah ... Voldemort murdered him and then stepped over his body toward my mum,” said Harry.

Slughorn gave a great shudder, but he did not seem able to tear his horrified gaze away from Harry’s face.

“He told her to get out of the way,” said Harry remorselessly. “He told me she needn’t have died. He only wanted me. She could have run.”

“Oh dear,” breathed Slughorn. “She could have . . . she needn’t . . . That’s awful. . . .”

“It is, isn’t it?” said Harry, in a voice barely more than a whisper. “But she didn’t move. Dad was already dead, but she didn’t want me to go too. She tried to plead with Voldemort . . . but he just laughed. . . .”

“That’s enough!” said Slughorn suddenly, raising a shaking hand. “Really, my dear boy, enough . . . I’m an old man . . . I don’t need to hear . . . I don’t want to hear . . .”

“I forgot,” lied Harry, Felix Felicis leading him on. “You liked her, didn’t you?”

“Liked her?” said Slughorn, his eyes brimming with tears once more. “I don’t imagine anyone who met her wouldn’t have liked her. . . . Very brave . . . Very funny . . . It was the most horrible thing. . . .”

“But you won’t help her son,” said Harry. “She gave me her life, but you won’t give me a memory.”

Hagrid’s rumbling snores filled the cabin. Harry looked steadily into Slughorn’s tear-filled eyes. The Potions master seemed unable to look away.

“Don’t say that,” he whispered. “It isn’t a question . . . If it were to help you, of course . . . but no purpose can be served . . .”

“It can,” said Harry clearly. “Dumbledore needs information. I need information.”

He knew he was safe: Felix was telling him that Slughorn would remember nothing of this in the morning. Looking Slughorn straight in the eye, Harry leaned forward a little.

“I am the Chosen One. I have to kill him. I need that memory.”

Slughorn turned paler than ever; his shiny forehead gleamed with sweat.

“You *are* the Chosen One?”

“Of course I am,” said Harry calmly.

“But then . . . my dear boy . . . you’re asking a great deal . . . you’re asking me, in fact, to aid you in your attempt to destroy —”

“You don’t want to get rid of the wizard who killed Lily Evans?”

“Harry, Harry, of course I do, but —”

“You’re scared he’ll find out you helped me?”

Slughorn said nothing; he looked terrified.

“Be brave like my mother, Professor. . . .”

Slughorn raised a pudgy hand and pressed his shaking fingers to his mouth; he looked for a moment like an enormously overgrown baby.

“I am not proud . . .” he whispered through his fingers. “I am ashamed of what — of what that memory shows. . . . I think I may have done great damage that day. . . .”

“You’d cancel out anything you did by giving me the memory,” said Harry. “It would be a very brave and noble thing to do.”

Hagrid twitched in his sleep and snored on. Slughorn and Harry stared at each other over the guttering candle. There was a long, long silence, but Felix Felicis told Harry not to break it, to wait.

Then, very slowly, Slughorn put his hand in his pocket and pulled out his wand. He put his other hand inside his cloak and took out a small, empty bottle. Still looking into Harry’s eyes, Slughorn touched

the tip of his wand to his temple and withdrew it, so that a long, silver thread of memory came away too, clinging to the wand-tip. Longer and longer the memory stretched until it broke and swung, silvery bright, from the wand. Slughorn lowered it into the bottle where it coiled, then spread, swirling like gas. He corked the bottle with a trembling hand and then passed it across the table to Harry.

“Thank you very much, Professor.”

“You’re a good boy,” said Professor Slughorn, tears trickling down his fat cheeks into his walrus mustache. “And you’ve got her eyes. . . . Just don’t think too badly of me once you’ve seen it. . . .”

And he too put his head on his arms, gave a deep sigh, and fell asleep.

Ná die Begrafnis

Stukkies helderblou lug begin oor die kasteel se torinkies verskyn, maar hierdie tekens van die aankomende somer laat Harry nie beter voel nie. Hy word gedwarsboom in al sy pogings om uit te vind wat Malfoy aanvang én elke keer dat hy probeer om 'n gesprek met Slughorn aan te knoop en hom te oortuig om die herinnering wat hy klaarblyklik al dekades lank onderdruk, te oorhandig.

“Vir die laaste keer, vergeet nou net van Malfoy,” sê Hermione streng vir Harry.

Hulle sit ná middagete saam met Ron in 'n sonnige hoekie van die binnehof. Hermione en Ron het elkeen 'n pamflet van die Ministerie van Towerkuns, *Algemene Appareringsfoute en Hoe om dit te Vermy*, want hulle gaan vanmiddag hul toetse aflê, maar die pamflette bring hul senuwees nie juis tot bedaring nie. Ron snak en probeer agter Hermione wegkruip toe 'n meisie om die hoek gestap kom.

“Dis nie Lavender nie,” sê Hermione verveeld.

“O, goed so,” sê Ron en ontspan weer.

“Harry Potter?” sê die meisie. “Ek is gevra om dit vir jou te gee.”

“Dankie ...”

Harry se hart sak in sy skoene toe hy die klein perkamentrol by haar neem. Toe die meisie buite hoorafstand is, sê hy: “Dumbledore het gesê hy gaan my nie vir nog lesse roep voor ek nie daai herinnering gekry het nie!”

“Miskien wil hy hoor hoe jy vorder?” stel Hermione voor terwyl Harry die perkament ooprol, maar dit is nie Dumbledore se lang, smal, skuins handskrif wat hy sien nie; dit is 'n onnet gekrap wat moeilik is om te lees, want daar is oral kolle op die perkament waar die ink geloop het.

Liewe Harry, Ron en Hermione

Aragog is laas nag dood. Harry en Ron, julle het hom ontmoet en julle weet hoe spesiaal hy was. Hermione, ek weet jy sou van hom gehou het. Dit sal vir my baie beteken as julle vroeg vanaand vir sy begrafnis kan

kom. Ek wil dit teen sononder doen, want dit was sy gunstelingtyd van die dag. Ek weet julle mag nie laat uitbly nie, maar julle kan die Mantel gebruik. Ek weet ek vra baie, maar ek kan hierdie ding nie op my eie doen nie.

Hagrid

“Lees,” sê Harry en gee die nota vir Hermione.

“O, hemel,” sê sy ná sy vinnig daarna gekyk het en gee dit vir Ron, wat al hoe meer ongelowig lyk hoe verder hy lees.

“Hy’s besimpeld!” sê hy woedend. “Daardie ding het vir sy pêle gesê om my en Harry op te vreet! Gesê hulle moet hulself help! En nou verwag Hagrid ons moet soontoe gaan en trane stort oor daai harige monster!”

“Dis nie net dit nie,” sê Hermione. “Hy vra ons om in die aand by die kasteel uit te sluip, en hy weet die sekuriteit is ’n miljoen keer strenger en ons sal in groot moeilikheid kom as ons gevang word.”

“Ons hét al voorheen in die nag by hom gaan kuier,” sê Harry.

“Ja, maar vir iets soos hierdie?” sê Hermione. “Ons het al baie gedoen om Hagrid te help, maar liewe hemel – Aragog is dood. As dit ’n geval was van hom wat gered moes word –”

“– dan sal ek nóg minder wil gaan,” sê Ron beslis. “Jy’t hom nie ontmoet nie, Hermione. Glo my, hy’s baie beter dood as lewend.”

Harry vat die nota terug en kyk na die groot inkkolle oral daarop. Daar het baie trane op hierdie perkament geval ...

“Harry, jy dink tog nie regtig daaraan om te gaan nie?” vra Hermione. “Dis so ’n sinnelose ding om detensie voor te kry.”

Harry sug.

“Ja, ek weet,” sê hy. “Ek veronderstel Hagrid sal Aragog maar sonder ons moet begrawe.”

“Hy sal, ja,” sê Hermione en lyk verlig. “Luister, daar gaan vanmiddag omtrent niemand by Towerdrankies wees nie, want ons lê almal ons toetse af ... Probeer om Slughorn dan ’n bietjie sag te maak!”

“Jy dink ek gaan die sewe-en-vyftigste keer gelukkig wees?” vra Harry bitter.

“Gelukkig,” sê Ron skielik. “Harry, ek het dit – kry die geluk aan jou kant!”

“Wat bedoel jy?”

“Gebruik jou geluksdrankie!”

“Ron, dis – dis briljant!” sê Hermione en klink verstom. “Natuurlik! Hoekom het ek nie daaraan gedink nie?”

Harry staar hulle al twee aan. “Die Felix Felicis?” sê hy. “Ek weet darem nie ... Ek spaar dit soort van ...”

“Waarvoor?” vra Ron verbaas.

“Wat op aarde is belangriker as hierdie herinnering, Harry?” vra Hermione.

Harry antwoord nie. Die gedagte aan daardie goue botteltjie dobber nou al geruime tyd in die uithoeke van sy verbeelding rond; vae en ongeformuleerde planne om te sorg dat Ginny vir Dean los en Ron wonder bo wonder bly is dat Harry haar nuwe kêrel is, broei lankal in die dieptes van sy brein – nie bewustelik nie, maar in sy drome of tydens daardie oorgangstadium tussen slaap en wakker word ...

“Harry? Is jy nog met ons?” vra Hermione.

“Wa- ? Ja, natuurlik,” sê hy en ruk hom reg. “Wel ... oukei. As ek Slughorn nie vanmiddag aan die praat kan kry nie, sal ek van die Felix drink en vanaand weer probeer.”

“Afgesprek,” sê Hermione saaklik. Sy staan op en maak ’n grasiëuse pirouette. “Destinasie ... determinasie ... deliberasie ...” prewel sy.

“Hou op daarmee,” smee Ron haar. “Ek voel klaar siek genoeg – Gou, staan voor my!”

“Dis nie Lavender nie!” sê Hermione ongeduldig toe nog ’n paar meisies in die binnehof verskyn en Ron agter haar induik.

“Cool,” sê Ron en loer oor Hermione se skouer om seker te maak. “Dêmmitt, hulle lyk nie gelukkig nie, nè?”

“Dis die Montgomery-susters en natuurlik lyk hulle nie gelukkig nie. Het jy nie gehoor wat met hulle kleinboetie gebeur het nie?”

“Ek moet jou eerlik sê, ek hou nie meer by met wat met wie se familie gebeur het nie,” sê Ron.

“Wel, hulle boetie is deur ’n weerwolf aangeval. Volgens gerugte het sy ma geweier om die Doodseters te help. In elk geval, die seuntjie was net vyf en hy’s in Sint Mungo dood; hulle kon hom nie red nie.”

“Hy’s dood?” herhaal Harry geskok. “Maar weerwolwe maak mos nie dood nie; hulle verander jou net in een van hulle?”

“Hulle maak partykeer dood,” sê Ron, wat nou ongewoon ernstig lyk. “Ek het al gehoor dit gebeur wanneer die weerwolf té mee- gesleur raak.”

“Wat was die weerwolf se naam?” vra Harry vinnig.

“Wel, daar loop stories dat dit Fenrir Greyback was,” sê Hermione.

“Ek het dit geweet – hy’s die maniak wat daarvan hou om kinders aan te val, die een van wie Lupin my vertel het!” sê Harry kwaad.

Hermione kyk hom droewig aan.

“Harry, jy moet daai herinnering kry,” sê sy, “sodat Voldemort gestop kan word. Al hierdie afgryslieke goed wat gebeur; dis alles oor hom ...”

Die klok lui bo hul koppe in die kasteel; Hermione en Ron spring op en lyk albei angsbevange.

“Julle sal oukei wees,” sê Harry toe hulle na die Ingangsportaal toe loop om by die res van die mense wat hul Appareringstoets gaan aflê, aan te sluit. “Voorspoed.”

“En vir jou ook!” sê Hermione met ’n veelseggende kyk toe Harry koers kies kerkers toe.

Daar is die middag net drie van hulle in die Towerdrankielas: Harry, Ernie en Draco Malfoy.

“Al drie te jonk om al te Appareer?” vra Slughorn gemoedelik. “Nog nie sewentien nie?”

Hulle skud hul koppe.

“Ag, nou ja,” sê Slughorn opgewek, “aangesien ons so min is, sal ons iets doen wat *pret* is. Ek wil hê julle moet vir my iets amusants aanmeekaarslaan.”

“Dit klink lekker, professor,” sê Ernie kruiperig en vryf sy hande. Malfoy daarenteen glimlag nie.

“Wat bedoel u, iets ‘amusants’?” vra hy geïrriteerd.

“O, verras my,” sê Slughorn lughartig.

Malfoy maak sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* met ’n suur gesig oop. Hy beskou hierdie klas duidelik as tydmors. Harry bekijk hom van bo-oor sy eie boek en besluit Malfoy is natuurlik vies omdat hy hierdie tyd beter kon bestee het daar in die Vertrek van Vereistes.

Is dit sy verbeelding of is Malfoy, nes Tonks, maerder? Hy lyk beslis bleker; sy vel het nog steeds ’n gryns skynsel, seker omdat hy deesdae so min in die daglik kom. Maar daar is niks meer van die selfvoldaanheid of opgewondenheid of meerderwaardigheid nie, niks van die windmaker houding op die Hogwarts Express toe hy openlik gespog het oor die sending waarop Voldemort hom gestuur het nie ... Harry kan net een afleiding hieruit maak en dit is dat die sending, wat dit ook al is, nie goed verloop nie.

Opgebeur deur hierdie gedagte blaai Harry deur sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* en kom af op die Halfbloed Prins se drasties gewysigde weergawe van ’n Euforie-elikser wat skynbaar nie net aan Slughorn se instruksie voldoen nie, maar wat (Harry se hart klop vinniger as hy daaraan dink) Slughorn in so ’n goeie bui sal sit dat hy bereid sal wees om daardie herinnering te oorhandig, as Harry hom net kan oorreed om daaraan te proe ...

“Nou toe nou, dit lyk absoluut wonderlik,” sê Slughorn ’n uur en ’n half later. Hy klap hande en staar af na die sonskyngel inhoud van Harry se heksetel. “Ek neem aan dis Euforie? En wat ruik ek?”

Mmmmmmm ... jy't 'n takkie peperment bygevoeg, of hoe? Onortodoks, maar wat 'n inspirasie, Harry. Dit sal natuurlik die newe-effekte soos 'n oormatige gesing en liederlike los tong wat by geleentheid voorkom, teëwerk ... Ek weet regtig nie waar jy aan al hierdie briljante idees kom nie, ou seun ... tensy –"

Harry gebruik sy voet om die Halfbloed Prins se boek dieper in sy sak te druk.

"– dit alles jou ma se gene is wat in jou uitkom!"

"O ... ja, miskien," sê Harry verlig.

Ernie lyk taamlik knorrig; hy was vasbeslote om Harry hierdie keer uit te stof en het halsoorkop sy eie towerdrankie aangemaak, maar dit het te dik geword en daar lê nou net 'n perserige klont onder in sy ketel. Malfoy pak sy sak met 'n suur gesig; Slughorn het sy Hikdoepa as bloot "redelik" afgemaak.

Die klok lui en Ernie en Malfoy loop dadelik.

"Professor," begin Harry, maar Slughorn kyk dadelik oor sy skouer; hy sien net hy en Harry bly in die vertrek oor en maak hom so vinnig moontlik uit die voete.

"Professor – Professor, wil u nie proe aan my dra – ?" roep Harry desperaat agter hom aan.

Maar Slughorn is reeds weg. Harry maak sy heksetel teleurgesteld leeg, pak sy goed in, gaan by die kerker uit en loop stadig op geselskamer toe.

Ron en Hermione kom laat die middag terug.

"Harry!" roep Hermione uit terwyl sy deur die portretopening klim. "Harry, ek is deur!"

"Mooi so!" sê hy. "En Ron?"

"Hy – hy het *net-net* gedruip," fluister Hermione toe 'n erg morbiede Ron by die vertrek inkom. "Hy was regtig ongelukkig. Dit was net 'n baie klein foutjie, maar die eksaminator het agtergekom hy't 'n halwe wenkbrou agtergelaat ... Hoe het dit met Slughorn gegaan?"

"Niks reggekry nie," sê Harry terwyl Ron by hulle aansluit. "Jammer, pêl, maar volgende keer sal jy dit maak – ons kan dit saam doen."

"Ja, seker," sê Ron knorrig. "Maar 'n *halwe* wenkbrou! Maak dit nou saak?"

"Ek weet," sê Hermione vertroostend. "Dit voel darem onnodig streng ..."

Hulle vaar heel aandete lank teen die Appareringseksaminator uit en Ron lyk effens vroliker teen die tyd dat hulle terug geselskamer toe loop en praat oor die voortslepende probleem van Slughorn en die herinnering.

“So, Harry – gaan jy die Felix Felicis nou gebruik, of wat?” wil Ron weet.

“Ja, ek moet seker maar,” sê Harry. “Maar ek glo nie ek gaan dit alles nodig hê nie, nie twaalf uur van geluk nie; dit kan nie heelaand vat nie ... Ek sal net ’n mond vol drink. Twee of drie uur behoort genoeg te wees.”

“Dit voel wonderlik wanneer jy dit inhet,” sê Ron terwyl hy terugdink. “Dis of jy niks verkeerd kan doen nie.”

“Waarvan praat jy?” vra Hermione en lag. “Jy’t nog nooit daarvan gedrink nie!”

“Ja, maar ek het gedink ek het!” sê Ron asof hy iets vanselfsprekends verduidelik. “Dis tog een en dieselfde ding.”

Hulle het Slughorn so pas eers by die Groot Saal sien ingaan en aangesien hulle weet hy hou daarvan om tydszaam te eet, vertoef hulle ’n rukkie in die geselskamer, want die plan is dat Harry na Slughorn se kantoor toe moet gaan wanneer die onderwyser genoeg tyd gehad het om weer terug soontoe te loop. Toe die son aan die Verbode Woud se boomtoppe raak, besluit hulle die tyd is ryp; hulle maak seker Neville, Dean en Seamus is almal in die geselskamer en sluip dan op na die seuns se slaapsaal.

Harry diep die opgerolde sokkies onder uit sy trommel op en haal die klein, blink botteltjie uit.

“Wel, hier gaan ek,” sê Harry. Hy lig die botteltjie op en neem versigtig ’n nie te groot sluk nie.

“Hoe voel dit?” fluister Hermione.

Harry antwoord vir ’n oomblik nie. Maar dan, stadig maar seker, begin daar ’n bruisende gevoel van oneindige geleenthede in hom opborrel; hy voel of hy enigiets kan doen, absoluut enigiets ... en om Slughorn se herinnering te kry, voel nie net moontlik nie, dit voel doodmaklik ... Hy kom glimlaggend op die been, tot oorlopens toe vol selfvertroue.

“Uitstekend,” sê hy. “Regtig uitstekend. Reg ... Ek gaan af na Hagrid toe.”

“Wat?” vra Ron en Hermione gelyk en ewe geskok.

“Nee, Harry – jy moet vir Slughorn gaan sien, onthou?” sê Hermione.

“Nee,” sê Harry selfversekerd. “Ek gaan na Hagrid toe. Dit voel vir my reg om na Hagrid toe te gaan.”

“Voel dit vir jou reg om ’n reusespinnekop te gaan begrawe?” vra Ron verstom.

“Ja,” sê Harry en haal sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel uit sy sak. “Ek voel dis die plek waar ek vanaand wil wees; julle weet wat ek bedoel?”

“Nee,” sê Ron en Hermione saam. Hulle lyk nou albei baie bekommerd.

“Dis seker die Felix Felicis,” sê Hermione bekommerd en hou die botteltjie na die lug toe op. “Het jy nie nog ’n botteltjie vol – ek weet nie –”

“Waansinssens?” stel Ron voor toe Harry sy Mantel oor sy skouers gooi.

Harry lag en Ron en Hermione lyk selfs nog meer bekommerd.

“Vertrou my,” sê hy. “Ek weet wat ek doen ... of ten minste ...” en hy loop vol selfvertroue deur toe, “Felix weet.”

Hy trek die Onsigbaarheidsmantel oor sy kop en loop by die trap af met Ron en Hermione kort op sy hakke. Aan die voet van die trap glip Harry by die oop deur uit.

“Wat het jy saam met *haar* daar bo gedoen?” gil Lavender Brown, wat regdeur Harry na Ron en Hermione kyk wat saam by die seuns se slaapsaal uitkom. Harry hoor Ron agter hom brabbel terwyl hy vinnig deur die vertrek beweeg.

Dit is maklik om deur die portretopening te kom; net toe hy nader kom, klim Ginny en Dean deur, en Harry kan tussen hulle deurglip. In die proses raak hy per ongeluk aan Ginny.

“Moenie aan my stoot nie, asseblief, Dean,” sê sy en klink vies. “Jy doen dit altyd, en ek kan op my eie deurklim ...”

Die portret swaai toe agter Harry, maar nie voor hy Dean kwaai hoor terugpraat nie ... met ’n gevoel van ekstase wat al groter word, stap Harry deur die kasteel. Hy hoef nie versigtig te wees nie, want hy kom niemand langs die pad teë nie, maar dit verbaas hom glad nie dat die geluk aan sy kant is nie: Vanaand is hy die gelukkigste persoon in Hogwarts.

Hy het nie die vaagste benul hoekom hy weet dit is die regte ding om te doen om na Hagrid toe te gaan nie. Dit is asof die towerdrankie ’n paar tree van die pad op ’n slag verlig: Hy kan nie die eindbestemming sien nie, hy kan nie sien waar Slughorn inpas nie, maar hy weet hy loop die regte pad om by daardie herinnering uit te kom. Hy kom in die Ingangsportaal en sien Filch het vergeet om die voordeur te sluit. Harry maak dit stralend oop en asem vir ’n oomblik die reuk van skoon lug en gras in voor hy met die trap af die skemer in loop.

Toe hy by die laaste trap kom, dink hy skielik hoe lekker dit sal wees om met die groentetuin langs na Hagrid se hut toe te loop. Dit is streng genome nie eintlik op die pad nie, maar dit voel vir Harry hy moet toegee aan hierdie gier, en daarom kies hy dadelik koers na die groentetuin waar hy baie bly, en nie totaal verras nie, is om professor Slughorn in gesprek met professor Sprout te sien. Harry hurk

agter 'n lae klipmuur en luister salig gelukkig na hul gesprek. "... Hartlike dank vir die moeite, Pomona," sê Slughorn beleefd. "Die meeste kenners is dit eens dat hulle op hul effektiëste is as hulle teen skemeraand gepluk word."

"O, ek stem heeltemal saam," sê professor Sprout gemoedelik. "Dit genoeg vir jou?"

"Meer as, meer as," sê Slughorn en Harry sien hy dra 'n arm vol blaarryke plante. "Hier behoort genoeg te wees sodat elkeen van my derdejaars 'n paar blare kan kry, en daar sal ook nog oor wees as iemand s'n té gaar gekook is ... Wel, goeienaand dan, en weer eens baie dankie!"

Professor Sprout verdwyn in die kwynende lig in die rigting van haar kweekhuise en Slughorn kom aangestap na die plek waar Harry onsigbaar staan.

'n Skielike begeerte om homself te onthul, pak Harry beet en hy pluk die Mantel met 'n swierige beweging van hom af.

"Goeienaand, professor."

"Merlin se baard, Harry, jy't my laat skrik," sê Slughorn, wat in sy vier spore vassteek en afgemat lyk. "Hoe het jy by die kasteel uitgekome?"

"Ek dink Filch het vergeet om die deure te sluit," sê Harry opgewek en is verheug om Slughorn te sien frons.

"Ek gaan daardie man rapporteer; as jy my vra, is hy meer bekommerd oor rommel as ordentlike sekuriteit ... maar hoekom is jy hier buite, Harry?"

"Wel, professor, dis Hagrid," sê Harry, wat weet hy doen nou die regte ding deur die waarheid te praat. "Hy's baie ontsteld ... maar professor moet asseblief vir niemand vertel nie. Ek wil nie hê hy moet in die moeilikheid kom nie ..."

Slughorn is duidelik nuuskierig.

"Ek kan niks belowe nie," sê hy stroef, "maar ek weet Dumbledore vertrou Hagrid volkome, so ek is seker hy kan nie met iets té onderduims besig wees nie ..."

"Wel, dis die reusespinnekop wat hy nou al jare lank het ... Die ding het in die Woud gebly ... Hy kon praat en alles –"

"Ek het praatjies gehoor van Akromantulas in die Woud," sê Slughorn sag en tuur na die massa swart bome. "Dis dus waar?"

"Ja," sê Harry. "Maar hierdie een, Aragog, was Hagrid se eerste een ooit, en hy is laas nag dood. Hagrid is verpletter. Hy wil nie alleen wees wanneer hy hom begrawe nie, en ek het gesê ek sal kom help."

"Roerend, roerend," sê Slughorn ingedagte met sy groot hangoë vasgenaël op die liggies daar ver in Hagrid se hut. "Maar 'n Akromantula

se gif is baie waardevol ... As die gedierte pas dood is, het dit dalk nog nie alles opgedroog nie ... Ek wil natuurlik nie onsensitief wees as Hagrid ontsteld is nie ... maar as daar enige manier is om daarvan te bekom ... Ek bedoel, dis bykans onmoontlik om 'n lewende Akromantula se gif in die hande te kry ..."

Dit lyk of Slughorn nou meer met homself as met Harry praat.

"... 'n vreeslike vermorsing om so 'n kans te laat verbygaan ... kry dalk 'n honderd Galjoene 'n pint ... my salaris is maar karig ..."

En nou weet Harry presies wat om te doen.

"Wel," sê hy en huiwer baie oortuigend, "wel, as professor graag wil saamkom, sal Hagrid dalk baie bly wees ... dan is daar nog meer van ons om vir Aragog tot siens te sê, weet u ..."

"Ja, natuurlik," sê Slughorn en sy oë glinster entoesiasties. "Ek sê jou wat, Harry, ek ontmoet jou daar onder met 'n bottel of twee ... dan drink ons op die gedierte se – wel – nie sy gesondheid nie – maar ons groet hom in styl wanneer hy begrawe is. Ek sal net eers 'n ander das gaan aansit; hierdie een is ietwat uitgelate vir só 'n geleentheid ..."

Hy waggel dadelik weg kasteel toe en Harry hardloop in sy noppies tot by Hagrid se hut.

"Jy't gekom," sê Hagrid skor toe hy die deur oopmaak en Harry van onder sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel te voorskyn kom.

"Ja – maar Ron en Hermione kon nie," sê Harry. "Hulle's rêrig jammer."

"Toemaar – maak nie saak nie ... Hy sou dit waardeer het dat jy hier is, Harry ..."

Hagrid gee 'n groot snik. Hy het vir hom 'n swart rouband gemaak uit 'n stuk lap wat lyk of dit vol skoenpolitoer gesmeer is en sy oë is pofferig, rooi en opgeswel. Harry klop hom vertroostend op die elmboog, wat die hoogste is wat hy Hagrid kan bykom.

"Waar gaan ons hom begrawe?" vra hy. "In die Woud?"

"Maskas, nee," sê Hagrid en vee sy stromende oë met die onderkant van sy hemp af. "Die ander spinnekoppe sal my nie naby die webbe toelaat noudat Aragog weg is nie. Ek kom nou agter dis net oor hy dit verbied het dat hulle my nie opgevrete het nie! Kan jy dit glo, Harry?"

Die eerlike antwoord is "ja"; Harry onthou nog pynlik goed hoe hy en Ron van aangesig tot aangesig teenoor die Akromantulas te staan gekom het: Dit was baie duidelik dat Aragog al rede was hoe-kom hulle Hagrid nie opgevrete het nie.

"Daar was nog nooit 'n deel van die Woud waarheen ek nie kon gaan nie!" sê Hagrid en skud sy kop. "Dit was nie maklik om Aragog

se liggaam daar uit te kry nie. Ek sê jou – hulle eet mos gewoonlik dié wat doodgaan – maar ek wou vir hom 'n mooi begrafnis gee ... ordentlik vir hom tot siens sê."

Hy begin weer snik, maar Harry klop hom weer op die elmboog en sê (omdat die towerdrankie blykbaar voel dis die regte ding om te doen): "Ek het professor Slughorn op pad hierheen raakgeloop, Hagrid."

"Hoop nie jy's in die moeilikheid nie?" sê Hagrid bekommerd. "Ek weet julle mag nie saans by die kasteel uitgaan nie. Dis alles my skuld –"

"Nee, nee, toe hy hoor waarheen ek op pad is, het hy gesê hy wil ook graag sy laaste eer aan Aragog kom betoon," sê Harry. "Ek dink hy het net gou iets meer gepas gaan aantrek ... en hy't gesê hy bring 'n paar bottels sodat ons op Aragog se nagedagtenis kan drink ..."

"Regtig?" vra Hagrid en lyk verbaas en aangedaan tegelyk. "Dis – dis gaaf van hom, baie gaaf; en ook om jou nie te gaan rapporteer nie. Ek het nog nooit juis met Horace Slughorn te doen gekry nie ... maar hy kom sê nogtans vir ou Aragog tot siens? Wel ... Aragog sou daarvan gehou het ..."

Harry dink in sy enigheid dat Aragog die meeste sou gehou het van al die eetbare vleis wat daar aan Slughorn is. Hy beweeg na die agterste venster in Hagrid se hut, kyk uit buitentoe en sien 'n gesig wat hom laat ril: 'n Enorme groot, dooie spinnekop lê op sy rug met sy bene opgekrul en in mekaar verstrengel.

"Gaan ons hom hier begrawe, Hagrid; hier in jou tuin?"

"Net anderkant die pampoenbedding, het ek gedink," sê Hagrid met 'n droë keel. "Ek het die – jy weet – graf daar gegrawe. Net gedink ons moet 'n paar mooi goed oor hom sê – mooi herinneringe, jy weet –"

Sy stem bewe en breek. Daar is 'n klop aan die deur en hy draai om, snuit sy neus in sy groot kolletjiesakdoek en gaan maak oop. Slughorn kom vinnig in met 'n hele paar bottels in sy arms en 'n somber swart krawat om die nek.

"Hagrid," sê hy in 'n diep, plegtige stem, "ek is innig jammer om van jou verlies te hoor."

"Dis baie gaaf," sê Hagrid. "Baie dankie. En dankie dat Harry nie detensie gekry het nie ..."

"Ek sal nie daarvan droom nie," sê Slughorn. "Droewe nag, droewe nag ... Waar is die arme gedierte?"

"Daar buite," sê Hagrid en sy stem bewe weer. "Sal ons – sal ons dit dan maar gaan doen?"

Die drie van hulle loop tot in die agtertuin. Die maan blink bleek deur die bome en sy strale skyn saam met die lig uit Hagrid se

venster op Aragog se liggaam wat op die rand van 'n massiewe put langs 'n tien voet hoë hoop vars gespitte grond lê.

“Manjifiek,” sê Slughorn en beweeg nader aan die spinnekop se kop; agt melkerige oë staar uitdrukkingloos in die lug en twee reuse geboë knypers skyn bewegingloos in die maanlig. Harry verbeel hom hy hoor die gerinkel van bottels toe Slughorn oor die knypers buig en blykbaar die enorme harige kop ondersoek.

“Dis nie almal wat waardering het vir hoe mooi hulle is nie,” sê Hagrid vir Slughorn se rug en die trane drup uit die hoeke van sy verrimpelde oë. “Ek het nie geweet jy stel belang in diere soos Aragog nie, Horace.”

“Stel belang? My liewe Hagrid, ek het die hoogste agting vir hulle,” sê Slughorn en gee 'n tree terug van die liggaam af. Harry sien die glinstering van 'n bottel onder sy mantel verdwyn, maar Hagrid vee al weer sy oë af en merk niks op nie. “Nou ja ... sal ons voortgaan met die begrafnis?”

Hagrid knik en beweeg vorentoe. Hy tel die reusagtige spinnekop in sy arms op en met 'n yslike steun rol hy hom by die donker put in. Die spinnekop tref die bodem met 'n onaardige kraakgeluid. Hagrid begin weer huil.

“Dis natuurlik moeilik vir jou wat hom die beste geken het,” sê Slughorn, wat nes Harry nie hoër as Hagrid se elmboog kan bykom nie, maar hom nogtans 'n vertroostende kloppie daarop gee. “So hoekom sê ek nie 'n paar woorde nie?”

Hy moes 'n hele klompie goeie kwaliteit gif by Aragog gekry het, dink Harry, want Slughorn glimlag selfvoldaan toe hy op die rand van die put gaan staan en in 'n stadige, indrukwekkende stem wegval: “Vaarwel, Aragog, koning van aragniede, wie se lang en getroue vriendskap dié van ons wat jou geken het nooit sal vergeet nie! Al sal jou liggaam verrot, sal jou gees bly voortlewe in die stille, webgespinde ruigtes van jou Woudtuiste. Mag jou veelogige afstammeling ewig floreer en jou mensevriende troos vind vir die verlies wat hulle gely het.”

“Dit was ... dit was ... pragtig!” weeklaag Hagrid. Hy werp hom op die komposhoop neer en huil harder as ooit.

“Toe nou, toe nou,” sê Slughorn en swaai sy towerstaf sodat die hoop grond opstyg en dan met 'n dowwe slag op die dooie spinnekop val en 'n netjiese heuweltjie vorm. “Kom ons gaan binnetoe en drink iets. Gaan om na sy ander kant toe, Harry ... Dis reg ... Kom, staan nou op, Hagrid ... Mooi so ...”

Hulle help Hagrid tot by 'n stoel langs die tafel. Tande het tydens die begrafnis in sy mandjie gaan opkrul, maar hy kom nou versigtig

nader en sit sy swaar kop soos gewoonlik op Harry se skoot neer. Slughorn maak een van die bottels wyn wat hy gebring het oop.

“Ek het hulle *almal* vir gif laat toets,” verseker hy Harry. Hy gooi die meeste van die eerste bottel in een van Hagrid se emmergroot bekers en gee dit vir Hagrid. “Ná wat met jou arme vriend Rupert gebeur het, het ek dat ’n huiself aan elke enkele bottel proe.”

Harry sien voor sy geestesoog die uitdrukking op Hermione se gesig as sy ooit van hierdie uitbuiting van huiselwe moet hoor en besluit om haar nooit daarvan te vertel nie.

“Een vir Harry ...” sê Slughorn en verdeel ’n tweede bottel tussen twee bekers, “... en een vir my. Wel,” sê hy en lig sy beker, “op Aragog.”

“Op Aragog,” sê Harry en Hagrid gelyk.

Slughorn en Hagrid drink groot slukke wyn, maar die Felix Felicis verlig die pad vorentoe vir Harry en hy weet hy moenie drink nie, daarom maak hy net of hy ’n sluk vat en sit die beker dan weer voor hom op die tafel neer.

“Ek het hom gehad van hy in ’n eier was, weet julle,” sê Hagrid aangedaan. “Was piepklein toe hy uitgebroei het. Omtrent so groot soos ’n pekinees.”

“Oulik,” sê Slughorn.

“Ek het hom in ’n kas bo by die skool aangehou tot ... wel ...”

Hagrid se gesig word donker en Harry weet hoekom: Tom Riddle wou Hagrid by die skool uitgegooi kry en het hom blameer vir die feit dat die Kamer van Geheimenisse weer oopgemaak is. Dit lyk egter nie of Slughorn luister nie; hy kyk op na die plafon waaraan daar ’n paar koperpotte hang en ook ’n lang, helderwit haarstring.

“Is dit eenhoringhare, Hagrid?”

“O ja,” sê Hagrid ongeërg. “Hulle sterte haak aan takke en goed in die Woud vas en dan verloor hulle van die hare, sien ...”

“Maar my liewe vriend, weet jy hoeveel so iets *werd* is?”

“Ek gebruik dit om verbande en goed mee vas te bind as ’n dier seerkry,” sê Hagrid en haal sy skouers op. “Dis nogal baie nuttig ... baie sterk.”

Slughorn neem nog ’n groot teug uit sy beker en Harry sien hoe sy oë nou sorgvuldig deur die hut beweeg op soek na nog skatte wat vir hom ’n konstante voorraad eikehoutverouderde heuningbier, versuikerde pynappelringe en fluweelbaadjies kan beteken. Hy maak Hagrid se beker weer vol en vra hom uit oor die kreature wat deesdae in die Woud bly en oor hoe Hagrid dit regkry om na hulle almal te kyk. Die drank en Slughorn se vleierende belangstelling laat Hagrid ontdooi; hy hou op om sy oë af te vee en begin vrolik en breedvoerig verduidelik hoe ’n mens met Takkruipers teel.

Die Felix Felicis pomp Harry in die sy en hy kom agter die voorraad drank wat Slughorn saamgebring het, raak vinnig op. Harry kon die Volmaakspreek nog nooit regkry sonder om die inkantasie hardop te sê nie, maar die gedagte dat hy dit vanaand nie sal kan doen nie, is lagwekkend. Harry grinnik by homself en sonder dat Slughorn en Hagrid dit agterkom (hulle ruil nou stories uit oor onwettige handel in draakeiers), rig hy sy towerstaf onder die tafel op die bottels en hulle word onmiddellik weer vol.

Ná 'n uur of wat begin Hagrid en Slughorn buitensporige heildronke drink: op Hogwarts, op Dumbledore, op elfgemaakte wyn en op –

“Harry Potter!” brul Hagrid en stort van sy veertiende beker wyn op sy ken toe hy die inhoud met een sluk wegslaan.

“Ja, inderdaad,” kraai Slughorn taamlik aangeklam. “Parry Hotter, die Uitverkore Seun Wat – wel – iets van daai aard,” mompel hy en drink sy beker ook leeg.

Nie lank hierna nie word Hagrid weer tranerig en gee die hele eenhoringstert vir Slughorn, wat dit in sy sak steek met uitroep van: “Op vriendskap! Op vrygewigheid! Op tien Galjoene per haar!”

En vir 'n rukkie daarna sit Hagrid en Slughorn sy aan sy, arms om mekaar, en sing 'n stadige, hartseer liedjie oor 'n towenaar genaamd Odo wat sterf.

“Aaaargh, die goeies gaan jonk dood,” mompel Hagrid, wat laag oor die tafel hang en effens skeel lyk terwyl Slughorn die refrein oor en oor sing. “My pa isj te jonk weg ... en sjo ook jou ma en pa, Harry ...”

Groot, vet trane loop weer uit die hoeke van Hagrid se gekreukelde oë; hy gryp Harry se arm en skud dit.

“... besjte heksj en towenaar van hulle ouderdom wat ek ooit geken het ... vreesjlik ... vreesjlik ...”

Slughorn sing droefgeestig:

*“En só het Odo die held ná jare terug huis toe gekom
Na die plek waar sy moeder aan hom die lewe moes gee
Hulle lê hom uiteindelik ter ruste en dop sy hoed om,
Breek sy towerstaf in twee, en ween oor sy wel en wee.”*

“... vreesjlik,” sê Hagrid sleptong. Sy groot wolhaarkop rol eenkant toe op sy arms en hy raak met 'n diep snork aan die slaap.

“Jammer,” sê Slughorn en hik. “Kan nie wysie hou om my lewe te red nie.”

“Hagrid het nie van professor se gesing gepraat nie,” sê Harry sag. “Hy't gepraat van my ma en pa wat dood is.”

“O,” sê Slughorn en onderdruk ’n groot wind. “O, genade. Ja, dit was – voorwaar vreeslik. Vreeslik ... vreeslik ...”

Dit lyk of hy skielik nie meer weet wat om te sê nie en hy skink hul bekere weer vol.

“Ek veronderstel jy – jy kan dit nie onthou nie, Harry?” vra hy ongemaklik.

“Nee – wel, ek was net een toe hulle dood is,” sê Harry met sy oë op die kersvlam wat flikker van Hagrid se hewige gesnork. “Maar ek het intussen uitgevind wat gebeur het. My pa is eerste dood. Het professor dit geweet?”

“Ek – ek het nie,” sê Slughorn gedemp.

“Ja ... Voldemort het hom vermoor en toe oor sy liggaam getree om by my ma uit te kom,” sê Harry.

Slughorn sidder en kyk Harry met afgryse aan; sy oë bly op die seun vasgenaël.

“Hy’t vir haar gesê om pad te gee,” sê Harry meedoënloos. “Hy’t vir haar gesê sy hoef nie dood te gaan nie. Hy wou net vir my hê. Sy kon weggehardloop het.”

“O, genade,” snak Slughorn. “So sy kon ... sy hoef nie ook ... Dis afgrysig ...”

“Dit is, nè?” sê Harry in ’n stem wat skaars meer as ’n fluistering is. “Maar sy het nie geroer nie. My pa was al dood en sy wou keer dat hy my ook doodmaak. Sy het by Voldemort probeer pleit ... maar hy het net gelag ...”

“Dis genoeg!” sê Slughorn skielik en lig sy hand bewend op. “Regtig, ou seun, dis genoeg ... Ek is ’n ou man ... Ek het nie nodig om dit te hoor nie ... Ek wil dit nie hoor nie ...”

“Ek het vergeet,” jok Harry onder aanmoediging van die Felix Felicis. “U het van haar gehou, nie waar nie?”

“Van haar gehou?” sê Slughorn en sy oë swem weer in die trane. “Ek dink nie enigiemand wat haar ontmoet het, het nie van haar gehou nie ... so dapper ... so vol grappe ... Dit was allerverskrikliks ...”

“Maar u wil haar seun nie help nie,” sê Harry. “Sy het haar lewe vir my opgeoffer, maar u wil nie vir my ’n herinnering gee nie.”

Hagrid se grommende gesnork vul die hele hut. Harry kyk stip in Slughorn se betraande oë. Die Towerdrankiemeester kry dit nie reg om weg te kyk nie.

“Moenie so sê nie,” fluister hy. “Dis nie ’n kwessie van ... As dit jou sal help, sal ek natuurlik ... maar dit kan geen doel dien nie ...”

“Dit kan,” sê Harry duidelik. “Dumbledore het inligting nodig. Ek het inligting nodig.”

Hy weet dit is veilig: die Felix sê vir hom Slughorn gaan môre-

oggend niks hiervan onthou nie. Harry kyk Slughorn reguit in die oë en leun 'n entjie vorentoe.

“Ek is die Uitverkorene. Ek moet hom doodmaak. Ek het daardie herinnering nodig.”

Slughorn word bleker as ooit; sy blink voorkop glinster van die sweet.

“Is jy *werklik* die Uitverkorene?”

“Natuurlik is ek,” sê Harry kalm.

“Maar dan ... My liewe seun ... jy vra baie ... jy vra my in werklikheid om jou te help om met hom af te reken –”

“Wil u nie afreken met die towenaar wat Lily Evans vermoor het nie?”

“Harry, Harry, natuurlik wil ek, maar –”

“U is bang hy sal uitvind u het my gehelp?”

Slughorn sê niks; hy lyk angsbevange.

“Wees dapper soos my ma, professor ...”

Slughorn lig 'n poshandjie en druk sy bewende vingers teen sy mond; hy lyk vir 'n oomblik soos 'n enorme baba.

“Ek is nie trots ...” fluister hy deur sy vingers. “Ek skaam my oor wat – oor wat daardie herinnering wys ... Ek dink ek het daardie dag groot skade aangerig ...”

“U kan vergoed vir enigiets wat u gedoen het deur die herinnering vir my te gee,” sê Harry. “Dit sal baie dapper en edel van u wees om dit te doen.”

Hagrid ruk in sy slaap en snork verder. Slughorn en Harry staan na mekaar oor die druppende kers. Daar is 'n lang, lang stilte, maar die Felix Felicis sê vir Harry om dit nie te verbreek nie, om te wag.

En dan, baie stadig, steek Slughorn sy hand in sy sak en haal sy towerstaf uit. Met sy ander hand haal hy 'n klein, leë botteltjie uit sy mantel. Terwyl hy nog steeds in Harry se oë kyk, raak Slughorn met die punt van sy towerstaf aan sy slaap, beweeg dit dan stadig weg en trek 'n lang, silwerdraadherinnering wat aan die punt van sy towerstaf vassit daaruit. Die herinnering rek langer en langer tot dit afbreek en silwer en helder aan die towerstaf hang. Slughorn laat sak dit in die botteltjie af; dit rol daarin op, versprei en begin soos gas rondwarrel. Hy sit die botteltjie se prop met 'n bewende hand op en gee dit dan oor die tafel vir Harry.

“Baie dankie, professor.”

“Jy's 'n goeie seun,” sê professor Slughorn terwyl trane by sy vet wange tot in sy walrusse afrol. “En jy het haar oë ... Moet asseblief net nie te sleg van my dink wanneer jy dit gesien het nie ...”

Dan sit hy ook sy kop op sy arms neer, gee 'n diep sug en raak aan die slaap.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



HORCRUXES

Harry could feel the Felix Felicis wearing off as he crept back into the castle. The front door had remained unlocked for him, but on the third floor he met Peeves and only narrowly avoided detection by diving sideways through one of his shortcuts. By the time he got up to the portrait of the Fat Lady and pulled off his Invisibility Cloak, he was not surprised to find her in a most unhelpful mood.

“What sort of time do you call this?”

“I’m really sorry — I had to go out for something important —”

“Well, the password changed at midnight, so you’ll just have to sleep in the corridor, won’t you?”

“You’re joking!” said Harry. “Why did it have to change at midnight?”

“That’s the way it is,” said the Fat Lady. “If you’re angry, go and

take it up with the headmaster, he's the one who's tightened security."

"Fantastic," said Harry bitterly, looking around at the hard floor. "Really brilliant. Yeah, I would go and take it up with Dumbledore if he was here, because he's the one who wanted me to —"

"He is here," said a voice behind Harry. "Professor Dumbledore returned to the school an hour ago."

Nearly Headless Nick was gliding toward Harry, his head wobbling as usual upon his ruff.

"I had it from the Bloody Baron, who saw him arrive," said Nick. "He appeared, according to the Baron, to be in good spirits, though a little tired, of course."

"Where is he?" said Harry, his heart leaping.

"Oh, groaning and clanking up on the Astronomy Tower, it's a favorite pastime of his —"

"Not the Bloody Baron — Dumbledore!"

"Oh — in his office," said Nick. "I believe, from what the Baron said, that he had business to attend to before turning in —"

"Yeah, he has," said Harry, excitement blazing in his chest at the prospect of telling Dumbledore he had secured the memory. He wheeled about and sprinted off again, ignoring the Fat Lady who was calling after him.

"Come back! All right, I lied! I was annoyed you woke me up! The password's still 'tapeworm'!"

But Harry was already hurtling back along the corridor and within minutes, he was saying "toffee éclairs" to Dumbledore's gargoyle, which leapt aside, permitting Harry entrance onto the spiral staircase.

“Enter,” said Dumbledore when Harry knocked. He sounded exhausted.

Harry pushed open the door. There was Dumbledore’s office, looking the same as ever, but with black, star-strewn skies beyond the windows.

“Good gracious, Harry,” said Dumbledore in surprise. “To what do I owe this very late pleasure?”

“Sir — I’ve got it. I’ve got the memory from Slughorn.”

Harry pulled out the tiny glass bottle and showed it to Dumbledore. For a moment or two, the headmaster looked stunned. Then his face split in a wide smile.

“Harry, this is spectacular news! Very well done indeed! I knew you could do it!”

All thought of the lateness of the hour apparently forgotten, he hurried around his desk, took the bottle with Slughorn’s memory in his uninjured hand, and strode over to the cabinet where he kept the Pensieve.

“And now,” said Dumbledore, placing the stone basin upon his desk and emptying the contents of the bottle into it. “Now, at last, we shall see. Harry, quickly . . .”

Harry bowed obediently over the Pensieve and felt his feet leave the office floor. . . . Once again he fell through darkness and landed in Horace Slughorn’s office many years before.

There was the much younger Slughorn, with his thick, shiny, straw-colored hair and his gingery-blond mustache, sitting again in the comfortable winged armchair in his office, his feet resting upon a velvet pouffe, a small glass of wine in one hand, the other rummaging

in a box of crystalized pineapple. And there were the half-dozen teenage boys sitting around Slughorn with Tom Riddle in the midst of them, Marvolo's gold-and-black ring gleaming on his finger.

Dumbledore landed beside Harry just as Riddle asked, "Sir, is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?"

"Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you," said Slughorn, wagging his finger reprovingly at Riddle, though winking at the same time. "I must say, I'd like to know where you get your information, boy, more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are."

Riddle smiled; the other boys laughed and cast him admiring looks.

"What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter — thank you for the pineapple, by the way, you're quite right, it is my favorite —"

Several of the boys tittered again.

"— I confidently expect you to rise to Minister of Magic within twenty years. Fifteen, if you keep sending me pineapple, I have *excellent* contacts at the Ministry."

Tom Riddle merely smiled as the others laughed again. Harry noticed that he was by no means the eldest of the group of boys, but that they all seemed to look to him as their leader.

"I don't know that politics would suit me, sir," he said when the laughter had died away. "I don't have the right kind of background, for one thing."

A couple of the boys around him smirked at each other. Harry was sure they were enjoying a private joke, undoubtedly about what they knew, or suspected, regarding their gang leader's famous ancestor.

“Nonsense,” said Slughorn briskly, “couldn’t be plainer you come from decent Wizarding stock, abilities like yours. No, you’ll go far, Tom, I’ve never been wrong about a student yet.”

The small golden clock standing upon Slughorn’s desk chimed eleven o’clock behind him and he looked around.

“Good gracious, is it that time already? You’d better get going, boys, or we’ll all be in trouble. Lestrangle, I want your essay by tomorrow or it’s detention. Same goes for you, Avery.”

One by one, the boys filed out of the room. Slughorn heaved himself out of his armchair and carried his empty glass over to his desk. A movement behind him made him look around; Riddle was still standing there.

“Look sharp, Tom, you don’t want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a prefect . . .”

“Sir, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Ask away, then, m’boy, ask away. . . .”

“Sir, I wondered what you know about . . . about Horcruxes?”

Slughorn stared at him, his thick fingers absentmindedly caressing the stem of his wine glass.

“Project for Defense Against the Dark Arts, is it?”

But Harry could tell that Slughorn knew perfectly well that this was not schoolwork.

“Not exactly, sir,” said Riddle. “I came across the term while reading and I didn’t fully understand it.”

“No . . . well . . . you’d be hard-pushed to find a book at Hogwarts that’ll give you details on Horcruxes, Tom, that’s very Dark stuff, very Dark indeed,” said Slughorn.

“But you obviously know all about them, sir? I mean, a wizard like you — sorry, I mean, if you can’t tell me, obviously — I just knew if anyone could tell me, you could — so I just thought I’d ask —”

It was very well done, thought Harry, the hesitancy, the casual tone, the careful flattery, none of it overdone. He, Harry, had had too much experience of trying to wheedle information out of reluctant people not to recognize a master at work. He could tell that Riddle wanted the information very, very much; perhaps had been working toward this moment for weeks.

“Well,” said Slughorn, not looking at Riddle, but fiddling with the ribbon on top of his box of crystalized pineapple, “well, it can’t hurt to give you an overview, of course. Just so that you understand the term. A Horcrux is the word used for an object in which a person has concealed part of their soul.”

“I don’t quite understand how that works, though, sir,” said Riddle. His voice was carefully controlled, but Harry could sense his excitement.

“Well, you split your soul, you see,” said Slughorn, “and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then, even if one’s body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged. But of course, existence in such a form . . .”

Slughorn’s face crumpled and Harry found himself remembering words he had heard nearly two years before: *“I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost . . . but still, I was alive.”*

“. . . few would want it, Tom, very few. Death would be

preferable.”

But Riddle’s hunger was now apparent; his expression was greedy, he could no longer hide his longing.

“How do you split your soul?”

“Well,” said Slughorn uncomfortably, “you must understand that the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole. Splitting it is an act of violation, it is against nature.”

“But how do you do it?”

“By an act of evil — the supreme act of evil. By committing murder. Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage: He would encase the torn portion —”

“Encase? But how — ?”

“There is a spell, do not ask me, I don’t know!” said Slughorn, shaking his head like an old elephant bothered by mosquitoes. “Do I look as though I have tried it — do I look like a killer?”

“No, sir, of course not,” said Riddle quickly. “I’m sorry . . . I didn’t mean to offend . . .”

“Not at all, not at all, not offended,” said Slughorn gruffly. “It’s natural to feel some curiosity about these things. . . . Wizards of a certain caliber have always been drawn to that aspect of magic. . . .”

“Yes, sir,” said Riddle. “What I don’t understand, though — just out of curiosity — I mean, would one Horcrux be much use? Can you only split your soul once? Wouldn’t it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces, I mean, for instance, isn’t seven the most powerfully magical number, wouldn’t seven — ?”

“Merlin’s beard, Tom!” yelled Slughorn. “Seven! Isn’t it bad

enough to think of killing one person? And in any case . . . bad enough to divide the soul . . . but to rip it into seven pieces . . .”

Slughorn looked deeply troubled now: He was gazing at Riddle as though he had never seen him plainly before, and Harry could tell that he was regretting entering into the conversation at all.

“Of course,” he muttered, “this is all hypothetical, what we’re discussing, isn’t it? All academic . . .”

“Yes, sir, of course,” said Riddle quickly.

“But all the same, Tom . . . keep it quiet, what I’ve told — that’s to say, what we’ve discussed. People wouldn’t like to think we’ve been chatting about Horcruxes. It’s a banned subject at Hogwarts, you know. . . . Dumbledore’s particularly fierce about it. . . .”

“I won’t say a word, sir,” said Riddle, and he left, but not before Harry had glimpsed his face, which was full of that same wild happiness it had worn when he had first found out that he was a wizard, the sort of happiness that did not enhance his handsome features, but made them, somehow, less human. . . .

“Thank you, Harry,” said Dumbledore quietly. “Let us go. . . .”

When Harry landed back on the office floor Dumbledore was already sitting down behind his desk. Harry sat too and waited for Dumbledore to speak.

“I have been hoping for this piece of evidence for a very long time,” said Dumbledore at last. “It confirms the theory on which I have been working, it tells me that I am right, and also how very far there is still to go. . . .”

Harry suddenly noticed that every single one of the old headmasters and headmistresses in the portraits around the walls was

awake and listening in on their conversation. A corpulent, red-nosed wizard had actually taken out an ear trumpet.

“Well, Harry,” said Dumbledore, “I am sure you understood the significance of what we just heard. At the same age as you are now, give or take a few months, Tom Riddle was doing all he could to find out how to make himself immortal.”

“You think he succeeded then, sir?” asked Harry. “He made a Horcrux? And that’s why he didn’t die when he attacked me? He had a Horcrux hidden somewhere? A bit of his soul was safe?”

“A bit . . . or more,” said Dumbledore. “You heard Voldemort: What he particularly wanted from Horace was an opinion on what would happen to the wizard who created more than one Horcrux, what would happen to the wizard so determined to evade death that he would be prepared to murder many times, rip his soul repeatedly, so as to store it in many, separately concealed Horcruxes. No book would have given him that information. As far as I know — as far, I am sure, as Voldemort knew — no wizard had ever done more than tear his soul in two.”

Dumbledore paused for a moment, marshaling his thoughts, and then said, “Four years ago, I received what I considered certain proof that Voldemort had split his soul.”

“Where?” asked Harry. “How?”

“You handed it to me, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “The diary, Riddle’s diary, the one giving instructions on how to reopen the Chamber of Secrets.”

“I don’t understand, sir,” said Harry.

“Well, although I did not see the Riddle who came out of the diary,

what you described to me was a phenomenon I had never witnessed. A mere memory starting to act and think for itself? A mere memory, sapping the life out of the girl into whose hands it had fallen? No, something much more sinister had lived inside that book . . . a fragment of soul, I was almost sure of it. The diary had been a Horcrux. But this raised as many questions as it answered.

“What intrigued and alarmed me most was that that diary had been intended as a weapon as much as a safeguard.”

“I still don’t understand,” said Harry.

“Well, it worked as a Horcrux is supposed to work — in other words, the fragment of soul concealed inside it was kept safe and had undoubtedly played its part in preventing the death of its owner. But there could be no doubt that Riddle really wanted that diary read, wanted the piece of his soul to inhabit or possess somebody else, so that Slytherin’s monster would be unleashed again.”

“Well, he didn’t want his hard work to be wasted,” said Harry. “He wanted people to know he was Slytherin’s heir, because he couldn’t take credit at the time.”

“Quite correct,” said Dumbledore, nodding. “But don’t you see, Harry, that if he intended the diary to be passed to, or planted on, some future Hogwarts student, he was being remarkably blasé about that precious fragment of his soul concealed within it. The point of a Horcrux is, as Professor Slughorn explained, to keep part of the self hidden and safe, not to fling it into somebody else’s path and run the risk that they might destroy it — as indeed happened: That particular fragment of soul is no more; you saw to that.

“The careless way in which Voldemort regarded this Horcrux

seemed most ominous to me. It suggested that he must have made — or been planning to make — more Horcruxes, so that the loss of his first would not be so detrimental. I did not wish to believe it, but nothing else seemed to make sense.

“Then you told me, two years later, that on the night that Voldemort returned to his body, he made a most illuminating and alarming statement to his Death Eaters. *‘I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality.’* That was what you told me he said. *‘Further than anybody.’* And I thought I knew what that meant, though the Death Eaters did not. He was referring to his Horcruxes, Horcruxes in the plural, Harry, which I do not believe any other wizard has ever had. Yet it fitted: Lord Voldemort has seemed to grow less human with the passing years, and the transformation he has undergone seemed to me to be only explicable if his soul was mutilated beyond the realms of what we might call ‘usual evil’ . . .”

“So he’s made himself impossible to kill by murdering other people?” said Harry. “Why couldn’t he make a Sorcerer’s Stone, or steal one, if he was so interested in immortality?”

“Well, we know that he tried to do just that, five years ago,” said Dumbledore. “But there are several reasons why, I think, a Sorcerer’s Stone would appeal less than Horcruxes to Lord Voldemort.

“While the Elixir of Life does indeed extend life, it must be drunk regularly, for all eternity, if the drinker is to maintain their immortality. Therefore, Voldemort would be entirely dependent on the Elixir, and if it ran out, or was contaminated, or if the Stone was

stolen, he would die just like any other man. Voldemort likes to operate alone, remember. I believe that he would have found the thought of being dependent, even on the Elixir, intolerable. Of course he was prepared to drink it if it would take him out of the horrible part-life to which he was condemned after attacking you, but only to regain a body. Thereafter, I am convinced, he intended to continue to rely on his Horcruxes: He would need nothing more, if only he could regain a human form. He was already immortal, you see . . . or as close to immortal as any man can be.

“But now, Harry, armed with this information, the crucial memory you have succeeded in procuring for us, we are closer to the secret of finishing Lord Voldemort than anyone has ever been before. You heard him, Harry: ‘Wouldn’t it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces . . . isn’t seven the most powerfully magical number . . . ’ *Isn’t seven the most powerfully magical number.* Yes, I think the idea of a seven-part soul would greatly appeal to Lord Voldemort.”

“He made *seven* Horcruxes?” said Harry, horror-struck, while several of the portraits on the walls made similar noises of shock and outrage. “But they could be anywhere in the world — hidden — buried or invisible —”

“I am glad to see you appreciate the magnitude of the problem,” said Dumbledore calmly. “But firstly, no, Harry, not seven Horcruxes: six. The seventh part of his soul, however maimed, resides inside his regenerated body. That was the part of him that lived a spectral existence for so many years during his exile; without that, he has no self at all. That seventh piece of soul will be the last

that anybody wishing to kill Voldemort must attack — the piece that lives in his body.”

“But the six Horcruxes, then,” said Harry, a little desperately, “how are we supposed to find them?”

“You are forgetting . . . you have already destroyed one of them. And I have destroyed another.”

“You have?” said Harry eagerly.

“Yes indeed,” said Dumbledore, and he raised his blackened, burned-looking hand. “The ring, Harry. Marvolo’s ring. And a terrible curse there was upon it too. Had it not been — forgive me the lack of seemly modesty — for my own prodigious skill, and for Professor Snape’s timely action when I returned to Hogwarts, desperately injured, I might not have lived to tell the tale. However, a withered hand does not seem an unreasonable exchange for a seventh of Voldemort’s soul. The ring is no longer a Horcrux.”

“But how did you find it?”

“Well, as you now know, for many years I have made it my business to discover as much as I can about Voldemort’s past life. I have traveled widely, visiting those places he once knew. I stumbled across the ring hidden in the ruin of the Gaunts’ house. It seems that once Voldemort had succeeded in sealing a piece of his soul inside it, he did not want to wear it anymore. He hid it, protected by many powerful enchantments, in the shack where his ancestors had once lived (Morfín having been carted off to Azkaban, of course), never guessing that I might one day take the trouble to visit the ruin, or that I might be keeping an eye open for traces of magical concealment.

“However, we should not congratulate ourselves too heartily. You

destroyed the diary and I the ring, but if we are right in our theory of a seven-part soul, four Horcruxes remain.”

“And they could be anything?” said Harry. “They could be old tin cans or, I dunno, empty potion bottles. . . .”

“You are thinking of Portkeys, Harry, which must be ordinary objects, easy to overlook. But would Lord Voldemort use tin cans or old potion bottles to guard his own precious soul? You are forgetting what I have showed you. Lord Voldemort liked to collect trophies, and he preferred objects with a powerful magical history. His pride, his belief in his own superiority, his determination to carve for himself a startling place in magical history; these things suggest to me that Voldemort would have chosen his Horcruxes with some care, favoring objects worthy of the honor.”

“The diary wasn’t that special.”

“The diary, as you have said yourself, was proof that he was the Heir of Slytherin; I am sure that Voldemort considered it of stupendous importance.”

“So, the other Horcruxes?” said Harry. “Do you think you know what they are, sir?”

“I can only guess,” said Dumbledore. “For the reasons I have already given, I believe that Lord Voldemort would prefer objects that, in themselves, have a certain grandeur. I have therefore trawled back through Voldemort’s past to see if I can find evidence that such artifacts have disappeared around him.”

“The locket!” said Harry loudly. “Hufflepuff’s cup!”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore, smiling, “I would be prepared to bet — perhaps not my other hand — but a couple of fingers, that they

became Horcruxes three and four. The remaining two, assuming again that he created a total of six, are more of a problem, but I will hazard a guess that, having secured objects from Hufflepuff and Slytherin, he set out to track down objects owned by Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. Four objects from the four founders would, I am sure, have exerted a powerful pull over Voldemort's imagination. I cannot answer for whether he ever managed to find anything of Ravenclaw's. I am confident, however, that the only known relic of Gryffindor remains safe."

Dumbledore pointed his blackened fingers to the wall behind him, where a ruby-encrusted sword reposed within a glass case.

"Do you think that's why he really wanted to come back to Hogwarts, sir?" said Harry. "To try and find something from one of the other founders?"

"My thoughts precisely," said Dumbledore. "But unfortunately, that does not advance us much further, for he was turned away, or so I believe, without the chance to search the school. I am forced to conclude that he never fulfilled his ambition of collecting four founders' objects. He definitely had two — he may have found three — that is the best we can do for now."

"Even if he got something of Ravenclaw's or of Gryffindor's, that leaves a sixth Horcrux," said Harry, counting on his fingers. "Unless he got both?"

"I don't think so," said Dumbledore. "I think I know what the sixth Horcrux is. I wonder what you will say when I confess that I have been curious for a while about the behavior of the snake, Nagini?"

"The snake?" said Harry, startled. "You can use animals as

Horcruxes?”

“Well, it is inadvisable to do so,” said Dumbledore, “because to confide a part of your soul to something that can think and move for itself is obviously a very risky business. However, if my calculations are correct, Voldemort was still at least one Horcrux short of his goal of six when he entered your parents’ house with the intention of killing you.

“He seems to have reserved the process of making Horcruxes for particularly significant deaths. You would certainly have been that. He believed that in killing you, he was destroying the danger the prophecy had outlined. He believed he was making himself invincible. I am sure that he was intending to make his final Horcrux with your death.

“As we know, he failed. After an interval of some years, however, he used Nagini to kill an old Muggle man, and it might then have occurred to him to turn her into his last Horcrux. She underlines the Slytherin connection, which enhances Lord Voldemort’s mystique; I think he is perhaps as fond of her as he can be of anything; he certainly likes to keep her close, and he seems to have an unusual amount of control over her, even for a Parselmouth.”

“So,” said Harry, “the diary’s gone, the ring’s gone. The cup, the locket, and the snake are still intact, and you think there might be a Horcrux that was once Ravenclaw’s or Gryffindor’s?”

“An admirably succinct and accurate summary, yes,” said Dumbledore, bowing his head.

“So . . . are you still looking for them, sir? Is that where you’ve been going when you’ve been leaving the school?”

“Correct,” said Dumbledore. “I have been looking for a very long time. I think . . . perhaps . . . I may be close to finding another one. There are hopeful signs.”

“And if you do,” said Harry quickly, “can I come with you and help get rid of it?”

Dumbledore looked at Harry very intently for a moment before saying, “Yes, I think so.”

“I can?” said Harry, thoroughly taken aback.

“Oh yes,” said Dumbledore, smiling slightly. “I think you have earned that right.”

Harry felt his heart lift. It was very good not to hear words of caution and protection for once. The headmasters and headmistresses around the walls seemed less impressed by Dumbledore’s decision; Harry saw a few of them shaking their heads and Phineas Nigellus actually snorted.

“Does Voldemort know when a Horcrux is destroyed, sir? Can he feel it?” Harry asked, ignoring the portraits.

“A very interesting question, Harry. I believe not. I believe that Voldemort is now so immersed in evil, and these crucial parts of himself have been detached for so long, he does not feel as we do. Perhaps, at the point of death, he might be aware of his loss . . . but he was not aware, for instance, that the diary had been destroyed until he forced the truth out of Lucius Malfoy. When Voldemort discovered that the diary had been mutilated and robbed of all its powers, I am told that his anger was terrible to behold.”

“But I thought he meant Lucius Malfoy to smuggle it into Hogwarts?”

“Yes, he did, years ago, when he was sure he would be able to create more Horcruxes, but still Lucius was supposed to wait for Voldemort’s say-so, and he never received it, for Voldemort vanished shortly after giving him the diary.

“No doubt he thought that Lucius would not dare do anything with the Horcrux other than guard it carefully, but he was counting too much upon Lucius’s fear of a master who had been gone for years and whom Lucius believed dead. Of course, Lucius did not know what the diary really was. I understand that Voldemort had told him the diary would cause the Chamber of Secrets to reopen because it was cleverly enchanted. Had Lucius known he held a portion of his master’s soul in his hands, he would undoubtedly have treated it with more reverence — but instead he went ahead and carried out the old plan for his own ends: By planting the diary upon Arthur Weasley’s daughter, he hoped to discredit Arthur and get rid of a highly incriminating magical object in one stroke. Ah, poor Lucius . . . what with Voldemort’s fury about the fact that he threw away the Horcrux for his own gain, and the fiasco at the Ministry last year, I would not be surprised if he is not secretly glad to be safe in Azkaban at the moment.”

Harry sat in thought for a moment, then asked, “So if all of his Horcruxes are destroyed, Voldemort *could* be killed?”

“Yes, I think so,” said Dumbledore. “Without his Horcruxes, Voldemort will be a mortal man with a maimed and diminished soul. Never forget, though, that while his soul may be damaged beyond repair, his brain and his magical powers remain intact. It will take uncommon skill and power to kill a wizard like Voldemort even

without his Horcruxes.”

“But I haven’t got uncommon skill and power,” said Harry, before he could stop himself.

“Yes, you have,” said Dumbledore firmly. “You have a power that Voldemort has never had. You can —”

“I know!” said Harry impatiently. “I can love!” It was only with difficulty that he stopped himself adding, “Big deal!”

“Yes, Harry, you can love,” said Dumbledore, who looked as though he knew perfectly well what Harry had just refrained from saying. “Which, given everything that has happened to you, is a great and remarkable thing. You are still too young to understand how unusual you are, Harry.”

“So, when the prophecy says that I’ll have ‘power the Dark Lord knows not,’ it just means — love?” asked Harry, feeling a little let down.

“Yes — just love,” said Dumbledore. “But Harry, never forget that what the prophecy says is only significant because Voldemort made it so. I told you this at the end of last year. Voldemort singled you out as the person who would be most dangerous to him — and in doing so, he *made* you the person who would be most dangerous to him!”

“But it comes to the same —”

“No, it doesn’t!” said Dumbledore, sounding impatient now. Pointing at Harry with his black, withered hand, he said, “You are setting too much store by the prophecy!”

“But,” spluttered Harry, “but you said the prophecy means —”

“If Voldemort had never heard of the prophecy, would it have been fulfilled? Would it have meant anything? Of course not! Do you think

every prophecy in the Hall of Prophecy has been fulfilled?”

“But,” said Harry, bewildered, “but last year, you said one of us would have to kill the other —”

“Harry, Harry, only because Voldemort made a grave error, and acted on Professor Trelawney’s words! If Voldemort had never murdered your father, would he have imparted in you a furious desire for revenge? Of course not! If he had not forced your mother to die for you, would he have given you a magical protection he could not penetrate? Of course not, Harry! Don’t you see? Voldemort himself created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much tyrants fear the people they oppress? All of them realize that, one day, amongst their many victims, there is sure to be one who rises against them and strikes back! Voldemort is no different! Always he was on the lookout for the one who would challenge him. He heard the prophecy and he leapt into action, with the result that he not only handpicked the man most likely to finish him, he handed him uniquely deadly weapons!”

“But —”

“It is essential that you understand this!” said Dumbledore, standing up and striding about the room, his glittering robes swooshing in his wake; Harry had never seen him so agitated. “By attempting to kill you, Voldemort himself singled out the remarkable person who sits here in front of me, and gave him the tools for the job! It is Voldemort’s fault that you were able to see into his thoughts, his ambitions, that you even understand the snakelike language in which he gives orders, and yet, Harry, despite your privileged insight into Voldemort’s world (which, incidentally, is a gift any Death Eater

would kill to have), you have never been seduced by the Dark Arts, never, even for a second, shown the slightest desire to become one of Voldemort's followers!"

"Of course I haven't!" said Harry indignantly. "He killed my mum and dad!"

"You are protected, in short, by your ability to love!" said Dumbledore loudly. "The only protection that can possibly work against the lure of power like Voldemort's! In spite of all the temptation you have endured, all the suffering, you remain pure of heart, just as pure as you were at the age of eleven, when you stared into a mirror that reflected your heart's desire, and it showed you only the way to thwart Lord Voldemort, and not immortality or riches. Harry, have you any idea how few wizards could have seen what you saw in that mirror? Voldemort should have known then what he was dealing with, but he did not!

"But he knows it now. You have flitted into Lord Voldemort's mind without damage to yourself, but he cannot possess you without enduring mortal agony, as he discovered in the Ministry. I do not think he understands why, Harry, but then, he was in such a hurry to mutilate his own soul, he never paused to understand the incomparable power of a soul that is untarnished and whole."

"But, sir," said Harry, making valiant efforts not to sound argumentative, "it all comes to the same thing, doesn't it? I've got to try and kill him, or —"

"Got to?" said Dumbledore. "Of course you've got to! But not because of the prophecy! Because you, yourself, will never rest until you've tried! We both know it! Imagine, please, just for a moment,

that you had never heard that prophecy! How would you feel about Voldemort now? Think!”

Harry watched Dumbledore striding up and down in front of him, and thought. He thought of his mother, his father, and Sirius. He thought of Cedric Diggory. He thought of all the terrible deeds he knew Lord Voldemort had done. A flame seemed to leap inside his chest, searing his throat.

“I’d want him finished,” said Harry quietly. “And I’d want to do it.”

“Of course you would!” cried Dumbledore. “You see, the prophecy does not mean you *have* to do anything! But the prophecy caused Lord Voldemort to *mark you as his equal*. . . . In other words, you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the prophecy! But Voldemort continues to set store by the prophecy. He will continue to hunt you . . . which makes it certain, really, that —”

“That one of us is going to end up killing the other,” said Harry. “Yes.”

But he understood at last what Dumbledore had been trying to tell him. It was, he thought, the difference between being dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death and walking into the arena with your head held high. Some people, perhaps, would say that there was little to choose between the two ways, but Dumbledore knew — *and so do I*, thought Harry, with a rush of fierce pride, *and so did my parents* — that there was all the difference in the world.

Horcruxe

Harry voel hoe die Felix Felicis sy krag verloor terwyl hy terug kasteel toe sluip. Die voordeur is nog steeds nie gesluit nie, maar op die derde verdieping sien hy vir Peeves en ontsnap naelskraap deur vinnig by een van sy kortpaaie in te skiet. Teen die tyd dat hy by die Vet Vrou se portret kom en sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel afhaal, verbaas dit hom nie dat sy in 'n uiters onhulpvaardige bui is nie.

“Besef jy hoe laat is dit?”

“Ek is regtig jammer – ek moes vir iets belangriks uitgaan –”

“Wel, die wagwoord het middernag verander, so jy sal maar net in die gang moet slaap.”

“Jy speel!” sê Harry. “Hoekom moes dit nou juis middernag verander?”

“Dis hoe dit is,” sê die Vet Vrou. “As jy kwaad is daaroor, gaan praat met die Skoolhoof. Dis hy wat die sekuriteit verskerp het.”

“Fantasties,” sê Harry bitter en kyk af na die harde vloer. “Rêrig briljant. Ek sou met Dumbledore hieroor gaan praat het as hy hier was, want dis hy wat wou hê ek moes –”

“Hy is hier,” sê 'n stem agter Harry. “Professor Dumbledore het 'n uur gelede teruggekeer skool toe.”

Nick-amper-sonder-kop sweef na Harry toe met sy kop wat soos gewoonlik op sy plooi kraag wankel.

“Ek het dit by die Bloedige Baron verneem. Hy het hom sien arriveer,” sê Nick. “Volgens die Baron het hy opgeruimd gelyk, hoewel natuurlik ietwat moeg.”

“Waar is hy?” vra Harry en sy hart klop wild.

“Og, hy kreun en klingel daar bo in die Sterrekundetoring; dis sy gunstelingtydverdryf –”

“Nie die Bloedige Baron nie; Dumbledore!”

“O – in sy kantoor,” sê Nick. “Uit wat die Baron gesê het, lei ek af daar is nog iets waaraan hy aandag moet skenk voor hy gaan slaap –”

“Dis reg, ja,” sê Harry en hy voel die opwinding in hom opvlam by die vooruitsig om vir Dumbledore te vertel hy het die herinnering

uiteindelik gekry. Hy swaai om, kies weer koers en ignoreer die Vet Vrou wat agter hom aanroep.

“Kom terug! Ek’s jammer, ek het gejoj! Ek was vies omdat jy my wakker gemaak het! Die wagwoord is nog steeds ‘lintwurm!’”

Maar Harry hardloop reeds terug met die gang langs en binne minute sê hy “koffie-éclairs” vir Dumbledore se drakekop wat opsy spring en Harry by die ingang na die spiraaltrap inlaat.

“Binne,” sê Dumbledore toe Harry klop. Hy klink uitgeput.

Harry stoot die deur oop. Dumbledore se kantoor lyk net soos altyd, maar die lug buite die vensters is swart en met sterre besaai.

“Goeie genugtig, Harry,” sê Dumbledore verras. “Waaraan het ek hierdie baie laat eer te danke?”

“Professor – ek het dit. Ek het die herinnering by professor Slughorn gekry.”

Harry haal die klein glasbotteltjie uit en wys dit vir Dumbledore. Vir ’n oomblik of twee lyk die Skoolhoof donkgeslaan. Dan verhelder ’n breë glimlag sy gesig.

“Harry, dit is voortreflike nuus! Welgedaan! Ek het geweet jy kan dit doen!”

Dit lyk of Dumbledore vergeet het hoe laat dit is; hy beweeg haastig om sy lessenaar, neem die botteltjie met Slughorn se herinnering met sy onbeseerde hand en loop na die kas waarop hy die Peinssif hou.

“En nou,” sê Dumbledore terwyl hy die klipkom op sy lessenaar neersit en die botteltjie se inhoud daarin gooi, “nou sal ons uiteindelik kan sien. Kom, Harry, gou ...”

Harry buig gehoorsaam oor die Peinssif en voel hoe sy voete die kantoor se vloer verlaat ... Hy val weer soos vantevore deur duisternis en beland in Horace Slughorn se kantoor, baie jare gelede.

Die baie jonger Horace Slughorn het dik, blink, strooikleurige hare en ’n gemmerblond snor; hy sit nou weer in die groot gestofeerde gemakstoel in sy kantoor; sy voete rus op ’n fluweelpoef, daar is ’n klein glasie wyn in een hand en die ander een soek in ’n boks versuikerde pynappelringe rond. Die halfdosyn tienerseuns sit weer om Slughorn met Tom Riddle in die middel; Marvolo se goue en swart ring glinster aan sy vinger.

Dumbledore land langs Harry net toe Riddle vra: “Professor, is dit waar dat professor Merrythought gaan aftree?”

“Tom, Tom, ek kan jou nie sê nie, al weet ek ook,” antwoord Slughorn en waai sy vinger aanmanend vir Riddle, hoewel hy terselfdertyd oogknip. “Ek moet sê, ek sal graag wil weet waar jy jou inligting vandaan kry, seun; jy weet meer as die helfte van die personeel.”

Riddle glimlag; die ander seuns lag en kyk hom vol bewondering aan.

“Met jou uitsonderlike vermoë om dinge te weet wat jy nie behoort te weet nie en die noukeurige manier waarop jy die mense wat saak maak, vlei – terloops, dankie vir die pynappels; jy’s heeltemal reg, dit is my gunsteling –”

’n Hele paar van die seuns giggel weer.

“– is ek seker jy gaan binne twintig jaar vorder tot die Minister van Towerkuns. Vyftien, as jy aanhou om vir my pynappels te stuur. Ek het *uitstekende* kontakte by die Ministerie.”

Tom Riddle glimlag net terwyl die ander weer lag. Harry sien hy is glad nie die oudste in die groep seuns nie, maar hulle sien blykbaar almal op na hom as hul leier.

“Ek weet nie of ek vir die politiek uitgeknipt is nie, professor,” sê hy toe die gelag weggesteef het. “Ek het om mee te begin nie die regte agtergrond nie.”

’n Paar van die seuns rondom hom glimlag selfvoldaan vir mekaar. Harry is seker hulle geniet ’n privaat grappie: ongetwyfeld oor iets wat hulle van hul bendeleier se beroemde voorvader weet of vermoed.

“Snert,” sê Slughorn vinnig. “Met vermoëns soos joune is dit so duidelik soos daglig dat jy van ordentlike towenaarsafkoms is. Nee, jy gaan dit ver bring, Tom; ek was nog nooit verkeerd oor ’n student nie.”

Die klein goue horlosie op Slughorn se lessenaar slaan elfuur agter hom en hy kyk om.

“Goeie genugtig, is dit al so laat? Julle beter spore maak, seuns, of ons gaan almal in die moeilikheid kom. Lestranger, ek wil jou opstel teen môre hê of jy kry detensie. Dieselfde geld jou, Avery.”

Die seuns loop een vir een by die vertrek uit. Slughorn trek homself uit sy leunstoel op en neem sy leë glas na die lessenaar. ’n Beweging agter hom laat hom omkyk; Riddle staan nog steeds daar.

“Lig loop, Tom; jy wil nie ná ure buite jou bed gevang word nie en jy’s ’n prefek ...”

“Professor, daar’s iets wat ek u graag wil vra.”

“Nou vra gerus, ou seun, vra gerus ...”

“Ek het gewonder wat weet professor van ... van Horcruxe?”

Slughorn staar na hom; hy streel ingedagte met sy dik vingers oor sy wynglas se steel.

“Projek vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste?”

Maar Harry kan sien Slughorn weet goed dit is nie vir skoolwerk nie.

“Nie regtig nie, professor,” sê Riddle. “Ek het op die woord afgekom terwyl ek opleeswerk gedoen het en ek het dit nie heeltemal verstaan nie.”

“Nee ... wel ... jy sal sukkel om hier in Hogwarts ’n boek te kry wat vir jou inligting oor Horcruxe gee, Tom. Dit is baie Donker dinge, baie Donker inderdaad,” sê Slughorn.

“Maar u weet alles daarvan af, nè, professor? Ek bedoel, ’n toewenaar soos u – ekskuus, as u my niks mag vertel nie, sal ek verstaan – maar ek het net geweet as enigiemand my kan sê, dan is dit u – so toe dog ek ek vra maar net –”

Hy doen dit baie goed, dink Harry; die huiwering, die ongeërgde stemtoon, die versigtige vleiere, nie te veel nie, net genoeg. Hy wat Harry is, het genoeg ondervinding van hoe dit voel om inligting met mooipraatjies uit mense te probeer kry en kan sien dit is ’n meester wat hier aan die werk is. Hy besef Riddle wil die inligting baie, baie graag hê; miskien stuur hy al weke lank op hierdie oomblik af.

“Wel,” sê Slughorn, wat nie na Riddle kyk nie, maar met die lint op sy boks versuikerde pynappels vroetel, “wel, dit kan seker nie skade doen om vir jou ’n breë oorsig te gee nie. ‘Horcrux’ is die term wat gebruik word vir ’n voorwerp waarin ’n persoon ’n deel van sy of haar siel versteek het.”

“Maar ek verstaan nie so mooi hoe dit werk nie, professor,” sê Riddle.

Hy hou sy stem versigtig onder beheer, maar Harry voel sy opgewondenheid aan.

“Wel, jy verdeel jou siel, sien,” sê Slughorn, “en steek ’n deel daarvan in ’n voorwerp buitekant jou liggaam weg. Dan kan jy nie sterf nie, al word jou liggaam aangeval of vernietig, want ’n deel van jou siel bly aardsgebonde en ongeskonde. Maar om in só ’n vorm te bestaan, is natuurlik ...”

Slughorn se gesig vertrek en Harry dwing homself om die woorde wat hy amper twee jaar gelede gehoor het, te onthou.

“Ek is uit my liggaam gebeur, ek was minder as ’n gees, minder as die laagste spook ... maar ek het nogtans gelewe.”

“... min mense sal dit kies, Tom, baie min. Die dood sal verkieslik wees.”

Maar Riddle se honger is nou duidelik; sy uitdrukking is gierig; hy kan sy hunkering nie langer wegsteek nie.

“Hoe verdeel ’n mens jou siel?”

“Wel,” sê Slughorn ongemaklik, “jy moet verstaan, die siel is veronderstel om ongeskonde en heel te bly. Om dit te verdeel, is ’n skending; dit is teen die natuur.”

“Maar hoe doen mens dit?”

“Deur ’n bose daad – die allerergste bose daad. Deur moord te pleeg. Moord skeur die siel uitmekaar. Die towenaar wat vasberade is om ’n Horcrux te skep, wend hierdie skade tot sy voordeel aan: hy verseël die afgeskeurde deel –”

“Verseël? Maar hoe – ?”

“Daar is ’n towerspreuk, moenie vir my vra wat nie, ek ken dit nie!” sê Slughorn en skud sy kop soos ’n ou olifant wat deur muskiete gepla word. “Lyk ek vir jou soos iemand wat dit al op die proef gestel het – lyk ek soos ’n moordenaar?”

“Nee, professor, natuurlik nie,” sê Riddle vinnig. “Ek’s jammer ... Ek wou nie aanstoot gee nie ...”

“Dis als reg, als reg; ek neem nie aanstoot nie,” sê Slughorn stroef. “Dis natuurlik om iewat nuuskierig oor hierdie dinge te wees ... towenaars van ’n sekere kaliber het nog altyd tot daardie aspek van die towerkuns aangetrokke gevoel ...”

“Ja, professor,” sê Riddle. “Maar wat ek nie verstaan nie – net uit nuuskierigheid – ek bedoel, sal een Horcrux enigiets werd wees? Kan jy jou siel net een keer verdeel? Sal dit nie beter wees, sal dit jou nie sterker maak, om jou siel in meer stukke te verdeel nie? Ek bedoel, sewe is tog die sterkste magiese getal, so miskien sal sewe –”

“Merlin se baard, Tom!” snak Slughorn. “Sewe! Is dit nie erg genoeg om daaraan te dink om een mens dood te maak nie? En in elk geval ... dis erg genoeg om die siel te verdeel ... maar om dit in sewe stukke te skeur ...”

Slughorn lyk nou erg beswaard: Hy staar na Riddle asof hy hom nog nooit voorheen duidelik gesien het nie en Harry weet hy berou dit dat hy enigsins by hierdie gesprek betrokke geraak het.

“Maar natuurlik,” mompel hy, “is dit waaroor ons gesels het alles hipoteties. Suiwer akademies ...”

“Ja, professor, natuurlik,” sê Riddle vinnig.

“Maar nietemin, Tom ... bly stil oor wat ek jou vertel het – ek bedoel, oor wat ons bespreek het. Mense sal nie daarvan hou as hulle hoor ons het oor Horcruks gesels nie. Dis ’n verbode onderwerp hier by Hogwarts, weet jy ... Dumbledore in die besonder is ten strengste daarteen gekant ...”

“Ek sal nie ’n woord sê nie, professor,” sê Riddle en hy loop, maar nie sonder dat Harry sy gesig vir ’n oomblik sien nie: Dit is vol van dieselfde wilde geluk wat daarop was toe hy die eerste keer uitgevind het hy is ’n towenaar, die soort geluk wat sy aantreklike gelaatstrekke nie versterk nie, maar dit op ’n manier minder menslik laat lyk ...

“Dankie, Harry,” sê Dumbledore sag. “Kom ons gaan ...”

Toe Harry terug op die kantoovloer beland, sit Dumbledore alreeds agter sy lessenaar. Harry kom sit ook en wag vir Dumbledore om te praat.

“Ek wag nou al baie lank vir hierdie brokkie inligting,” sê Dumbledore uiteindelik. “Dit bevestig die teorie waaraan ek lankal werk; dit sê vir my ek is reg, en ook dat ons nog ’n baie lang pad moet loop ...”

Harry merk skielik elke enkele een van die ou skoolhoofde in die portrette op die mure rondom hulle is wakker en luister na hul gesprek. ’n Dikkerige rooineustowenaar het selfs ’n gehoorbuis uitgehaal.

“Wel, Harry,” sê Dumbledore, “ek is seker jy verstaan wat dit wat ons so pas gehoor het, beteken. Op jou ouderdom, dalk ’n paar maande jonger of ouer, het Tom Riddle alles in sy vermoë gedoen om uit te vind hoe om homself onsterflik te maak.”

“Dink professor hy het dit reggekry?” vra Harry. “Het hy ’n Horcrux gemaak? Is dit hoekom hy nie dood is toe hy my aangeval het nie? Het hy ’n Horcrux iewers weggesteek? Was ’n deel van sy siel veilig?”

“’n Deel ... of meer,” sê Dumbledore. “Jy het Voldemort gehoor: Wat hy spesifiek by Horace wou hoor, was sy mening oor wat sal gebeur met ’n towenaar wat meer as een Horcrux skep, wat sal gebeur met ’n towenaar wat so vasberade is om die dood te ontwyk dat hy bereid is om verskeie moorde te pleeg, sy siel herhaaldelik te verskeur en dit in baie verskillende Horcruxe te versteek. Geen boek sou vir hom daardie inligting kon gee nie. Sover ek weet – en ek is seker sover Voldemort destyds geweet het – het geen towenaar nog ooit meer gedoen as om sy siel in twee te skeur nie.”

Dumbledore bly vir ’n oomblik stil, kry sy gedagtes agtermekaar en sê dan: “Vier jaar gelede het ek iets gekry wat volgens my onomwonde bewys was dat Voldemort sy siel verdeel het.”

“Waar?” vra Harry. “Hoe?”

“Jy het dit vir my gegee, Harry,” sê Dumbledore. “Die dagboek, Riddle se dagboek; die een wat instruksies gee oor hoe om die Kamer van Geheimenisse weer oop te kry.”

“Ek verstaan nie, professor,” sê Harry.

“Wel, hoewel ek nie die Riddle wat uit die dagboek gekom het, gesien het nie, was dít wat jy vir my beskryf het ’n fenomeen wat ek nog nooit aanskou het nie. ’n Blote herinnering wat op eie houtjie begin dink en optree? ’n Blote herinnering wat die lewe uit ’n meisie in wie se hande dit beland het, suig? Nee, daar het iets baie meer onheilspellends in daardie dagboek gelewe ... ’n fragment van ’n

siel, daarvan was ek amper seker. Die dagboek was 'n Horcrux. Maar dit het net soveel vrae na vore laat kom as wat dit beantwoord het. Wat vir my die vreemdste en ontstellendste was, was dat daardie dagboek bedoel was om sowel 'n wapen as 'n beskerming te wees."

"Ek verstaan nog steeds nie," sê Harry.

"Wel, dit het gewerk soos wat 'n Horcrux veronderstel is om te werk – met ander woorde, dit het die fragment van die siel wat daarin versteek is, veilig bewaar en het definitief 'n rol daarin gespeel om die eienaar se dood te voorkom. Maar Riddle wou ongetwyfeld hê die dagboek moet weer gelees word; hy wou hê daardie stukkie van sy siel moes van iemand anders besit neem sodat Slytherin se monster weer losgelaat kon word."

"Hy wou nie hê sy harde werk moes tot niet gaan nie," sê Harry. "Hy wou hê mense moes weet hy is Slytherin se erfgenaam, want hy kon nie destyds die eer daarvoor kry nie."

"Heeltemal reg," sê Dumbledore en knik. "Maar kan jy sien, Harry, dat as dit sy bedoeling was dat die dagboek vir 'n toekomstige Hogwarts-student gegee of op die persoon geplant moes word, hy buitengewoon blasé was oor die kosbare fragment van sy siel wat daarin versteek was. Die doel van 'n Horcrux is, soos wat professor Slughorn verduidelik het, om 'n deel van die self te versteek en veilig te bewaar, nie om dit in iemand anders se skoot te laat beland en die gevaar te loop dat dit vernietig sal word nie – soos wat inderdaad gebeur het: Daardie spesifieke fragment van die siel bestaan nie meer nie, danksy jou.

"Die onverskillige manier waarop Voldemort hierdie Horcrux behandel het, was vir my baie onheilspellend. Dit het my laat besef hy het nóg Horcruxe – of hy beplan om nog te maak – en daarom was die verlies van sy eerste een nie so 'n groot skade nie. Ek wou dit nie glo nie, maar niks anders het sin gemaak nie.

"En toe, twee jaar daarná, het jy my vertel dat Voldemort die nag wat hy na sy liggaam teruggekeer het, 'n baie insiggewende en ontstellende stelling voor sy Doodseters gemaak het: "*Ek, wat verder as enigiemand anders gevorder het op die pad wat na onsterflikheid lei.*" Dis wat jy vir my vertel het. "*Verder as enigiemand anders.*" Ek het gedink ek weet wat dit beteken, selfs al het die Doodseters nie. Hy het verwys na sy Horcruxe, Horcruxe in die meervoud, Harry; iets wat ek twyfel enige ander towenaar al ooit oor beskik het. Maar dit het sin gemaak: Die Heer Voldemort het met die jare al minder menslik geword en ek kon die transformasie wat hy ondergaan het net toeskryf aan die feit dat sy siel vermink is buite die grense van wat ons as gewone boosheid sou beskou ..."

“So, hy’t ander mense doodgemaak sodat dit onmoontlik moet wees om hom dood te maak?” sê Harry. “Maar as onsterflikheid vir hom so belangrik was, kon hy mos net ’n Towenaar se Steen gemaak of gesteel het?”

“Wel, ons weet hy hét dit probeer doen, vyf jaar gelede,” sê Dumbledore. “Maar daar is verskeie redes hoekom ek dink ’n Towenaar se Steen sal vir die Heer Voldemort minder aantreklik as Horcruxe wees.

“Die Lewenselikser verleng inderdaad jou lewe, maar dit moet gereeld gedrink word, tot in ewigheid, as die drinker sy onsterflikheid wil behou. Voldemort sou dus totaal afhanklik van die Elikser wees, en as dit sou opraak of besoedel word, of as die Steen gesteel sou word, sou hy net soos enige ander mens doodgaan. Onthou, Voldemort hou daarvan om alleen te werk. Ek dink hy sou die gedagte om afhanklik te wees, selfs van die Elikser, ondraaglik gevind het. Hy was natuurlik bereid om dit te drink as dit hom sou bevry van die aaklige halflewe waartoe hy verdoem is nadat hy jou aangeval het, maar net om weer ’n liggaam te bekom. Daarná is ek seker het hy beplan om op sy Horcruxe staat te maak: Hy sou niks meer nodig hê nie, hy moes net eers weer ’n menslike vorm herwin. Jy sien, hy was alreeds onsterflik ... of so ná aan onsterflik as wat enige mens kan wees.

“Maar nou, Harry, gewapen met hierdie inligting, die deurslaggewende herinnering wat jy vir ons bekom het, is ons nader as wat enigiemand nog ooit was aan die geheim oor hoe om die Heer Voldemort te vernietig. Jy het hom gehoor, Harry: ‘Sal dit nie beter wees, sal dit jou nie sterker maak om jou siel in meer stukke te verdeel nie? ... Sewe is tog die sterkste magiese getal ...’ *Sewe is tog die sterkste magiese getal.* Ja, ek dink die idee van ’n sewedelige siel sal vir die Heer Voldemort baie aanloklik wees.”

“Het hy sewe Horcruxe gemaak?” vra Harry vervul met afgryse terwyl verskeie van die portrette teen die mure soortgelyke geluide van skok en verontwaardiging uiter. “Maar hulle kan enige plek in die wêreld wees – weggesteek – begrawe of onsigbaar –”

“Ek is bly jy het begrip vir die omvang van die probleem,” sê Dumbledore kalm. “Maar eerstens, nee, Harry, nie sewe Horcruxe nie: ses. Die sewende deel van sy siel, al is dit ook hóé vermink, woon nog steeds in sy herskepte liggaam. Dit is die deel van hom wat vir soveel jaar gedurende sy ballingskap ’n newelbestaan gevoer het; daarsonder het hy hoegenaamd geen self nie. Daardie sewende deel van sy siel sal die laaste deel wees wat iemand wat Voldemort wil uitwis, moet aanval – die deel wat in sy liggaam lewe.”

“Maar wat dan van die ses Horcruxe?” vra Harry effens desperaat. “Waar is ons veronderstel om hulle te kry?”

“Jy vergeet ... Jy het reeds een van hulle vernietig. En ek het ’n ander een vernietig.”

“U het?” vra Harry gretig.

“Ja, inderdaad,” sê Dumbledore en lig sy swart hand wat so verbrand lyk. “Die ring, Harry. Marvolo se ring. En daar was ’n verskriklike vloek daarop. Was dit nie – vergewe my my gebrek aan die nodige nederigheid – vir my buitengewone vaardigheid en vir professor Snape se tydige optrede toe ek swaar gewond teruggekeer het na Hogwarts nie, sou ek bes moontlik nie gelewe het om die storie te vertel nie. Nogtans, ’n verskrompelde hand voel na ’n aanvaarbare opoffering in ruil vir ’n sewende van Voldemort se siel. Die ring is nie meer ’n Horcrux nie.”

“Waar het u dit gekry?”

“Wel, soos jy nou weet, spits ek my al baie jare lank daarop toe om soveel moontlik oor Voldemort se vorige lewe uit te vind. Ek het ver en veel gereis en die plekke wat hy voorheen geken het almal besoek. Ek het die ring by die Gaunts se huis gekry; dit was daar tussen die puin weggesteek. Blykbaar wou Voldemort dit nie meer dra nadat hy daarin geslaag het om ’n deel van sy siel daarin te verseël nie. Hy het dit met baie sterk towerkrag beskerm en weggesteek in die krot waarin sy voorsate eers gebly het (Morfin was toe natuurlik al in Azkaban). Hy het uiteraard nooit kon raai dat ek eendag die moeite sal doen om die bouval te besoek of dat ek my oë vir tekens van ’n magiese wegsteekplek sou oophou nie.

“Ons moet onself egter nie té hartlik gelukwens nie. Jy het die dagboek vernietig en ek die ring, maar as ons teorie van die sewedelige siel reg is, bly daar nog vier Horcruxe oor.”

“En hulle kan enigiets wees?” vra Harry. “Ou blikke of wat ook al, leë towerdrankiebottels ...?”

“Jy dink aan Poortsleutels, Harry, wat gewone voorwerpe moet wees wat maklik mis gekyk kan word. Maar sal die Heer Voldemort blikke of ou towerdrankiebottels gebruik om sy eie kosbare siel in te bewaar? Jy vergeet wat ek vir jou gewys het. Die Heer Voldemort het daarvan gehou om trofee te versamel, en hy het voorwerpe met ’n sterk magiese geskiedenis verkies. Sy trots, sy geloof in sy eie meerderwaardigheid, sy vasbeslotenheid om vir homself op ’n opspraakwekkende manier naam te maak in die geskiedenis van towerkuns; hierdie dinge laat my dink dat Voldemort sy Horcruxe met groot sorg sou kies en slegs voorwerpe wat die eer waardig is, goed genoeg sou ag.”

“Die dagboek was nie so spesiaal nie.”

“Die dagboek, soos jy self gesê het, het bewys dat hy Slytherin se erfgenaam is; ek is seker hy het dit as ontsettend belangrik beskou.”

“En die ander Horcruxe?” wil Harry weet. “Dink u u weet wat hulle is, professor?”

“Ek kan maar net raai,” sê Dumbledore. “Om redes wat ek reeds verskaf het, glo ek die Heer Voldemort sal voorwerpe verkies wat op sigself roemryk is. Ek het Voldemort se verlede derhalwe ondersoek om te sien of ek bewyse kan vind dat sodanige artefakte verdwyn het terwyl hy naby was.”

“Die hangertjie!” sê Harry hard. “Hoesenproes se beker!”

“Ja,” sê Dumbledore en glimlag. “Ek is bereid om te wed – miskien nie op my ander hand nie – maar op ’n paar vingers, dat hulle Horcruxe drie en vier geword het. Die oorblywende twee, as ons weer eens aanvaar hy het ’n totaal van ses geskep, is meer van ’n probleem, maar ek sal ’n kans waag en raai dat toe hy voorwerpe van Hoesenproes en Slytherin ingepalm het, hy ook voorwerpe wat aan Gryffindor of Raweklou behoort het, probeer opspoor het. Vier voorwerpe afkomstig van die vier stigters sou na my mening Voldemort se verbeelding aangegryp het. Ek weet nie of hy ooit daarin geslaag het om enigiets van Raweklou op te spoor nie, maar ek weet vir seker die enigste antieke aandenking van Gryffindor waarvan ek weet, is steeds veilig.”

Dumbledore wys met sy swartgebrande vingers na die muur agter hom waar ’n swaard met ’n robynhandvatsel in ’n glaskas lê.

“Dink Professor dis die eintlike rede hoekom hy terug Hogwarts toe wou kom?” vra Harry. “Om iets te kry wat aan die ander stigters behoort het?”

“Dis presies wat ek dink,” sê Dumbledore. “Maar ongelukkig help dit ons nie veel nie, want hy is weggewys sonder dat hy kans gekry het om die skool te deursoek, altans dis wat ek dink. Ek is dus genoodsaak om tot die gevolgtrekking te kom dat hy nooit sy ambisie om vier stigtersvoorwerpe bymekaar te maak, kon vervul nie. Hy besit definitief twee – hy mag selfs ’n derde een gevind het – maar verder as dit gaan ons nie nou kom nie.”

“Selfs al hét hy iets van Raweklou of Gryffindor in die hande gekry, bly daar nog ’n sesde Horcrux oor,” sê Harry terwyl hy op sy vingers tel. “Behalwe as hy albei gekry het?”

“Ek dink nie so nie,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek dink ek weet wat die sesde Horcrux is. Ek wonder wat jy sal sê as ek vir jou sê ek is nou al ’n geruime tyd nuuskierig oor die slang Nagini se gedrag?”

“Die slang?” vra Harry geskok “Kan ’n mens diere as Horcruxe gebruik?”

“Wel, dit is nie raadsaam om dit te doen nie,” sê Dumbledore, “want om ’n deel van jou siel toe te vertrou aan iets wat self kan dink en beweeg, is vanselfsprekend uiters riskant. Maar as my berekeninge kloep, het Voldemort nog steeds minstens een Horcrux kortgekom om sy doelwit van ses te bereik toe hy by jou ouers se huis in is met die doel om jou te vermoor.

“Dit wil vir my voorkom of hy die proses van Horcruxe maak tot besonder betekenisvolle moorde beperk het. Jy sou definitief daarvoor gekwalifiseer het. Hy het geglo deur jou te vermoor sal hy die gevaar waarvan die profesie praat, finaal elimineer. Hy het geglo hy gaan homself onoorwinlik maak. Ek is seker hy het beplan om met jou dood sy laaste Horcrux te maak.

“Soos ons weet, het hy misluk. Ná ’n tussenpose van ’n paar jaar het hy Nagini egter gebruik om ’n ou Moggelman dood te maak en die gedagte om haar sy laaste Horcrux te maak kon toe by hom opgekom het. Sy beklemtoon sy verbintenis met Slytherin, wat die Heer Voldemort se mistieke status versterk. Ek dink hy is moontlik so geheg aan haar as wat hy aan enigiets kan wees; hy hou definitief daarvan om haar naby aan hom te hou en dit lyk of hy buitengewone mag oor haar het, selfs vir ’n Parselmond.”

“So,” sê Harry, “die dagboek is weg en die ring is weg. Die beker, die hangertjie en die slang is nog ongeskonde en u dink daar is dalk ’n Horcrux wat vroeër aan Raweklou of Gryffindor behoort het?”

“’n Uitsers bondige en akkurate opsomming,” sê Dumbledore met ’n kopbuiging.

“So ... soek professor nog steeds daarna? Is dit hoekom u deesdae so min hier by die skool is?”

“Korrek,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek soek nou al baie lank. Ek dink ... moontlik ... is ek op die punt om nog een te ontdek. Daar is bemoedigende tekens.”

“En as u dit kry,” sê Harry vinnig, “kan ek saam met u gaan en u help om dit te vernietig?”

Dumbledore kyk Harry vir ’n oomblik baie stip aan voor hy sê: “Ja, ek dink so.”

“Regtig?” sê Harry totaal uit die veld geslaan.

“O ja,” sê Dumbledore en glimlag effens. “Ek dink jy het daardie reg verdien.”

Harry voel hoe sy hart bokspring. Dit is wonderlik om vir ’n verandering nie woorde van waarskuwing en beskerming te hoor nie. Die skoolhoofde teen die mure lyk minder beïndruk met

Dumbledore se besluit; Harry sien hoe 'n paar van hulle kop skud, en Phineas Nigellus snork sommer openlik verontwaardig.

Harry ignoreer die portrette en vra: "Weet Voldemort wanneer 'n Horcrux vernietig word, professor? Kan hy dit voel?"

"Dis 'n baie interessante vraag, Harry. Ek dink nie so nie. Ek dink Voldemort gaan nou so op in die bose en hy het al so lankal van hierdie kardinale dele van homself afstand gedoen dat hy nie meer soos ons gevoelens het nie. Miskien sal hy die oomblik dat hy doodgaan, bewus word van sy verlies ... maar hy het byvoorbeeld nie geweet die dagboek is verwoes totdat Lucius Malfoy vir hom die volle waarheid vertel het nie. Volgens wat ek hoor, was Voldemort se woede toe hy ontdek die dagboek is geskend en van al sy magte ontnem iets verskrikliks om te aanskou."

"Maar ek dog hy wou hê Lucius Malfoy moes dit by Hogwarts insmokkel?"

"Ja, hy wou, jare gelede, toe hy seker was hy sou nog meer Horcruxe kon skep, maar Lucius was veronderstel om te wag tot Voldemort hom aansê om dit te doen, en hy het nie, want Voldemort het verdwyn kort nadat hy die dagboek vir hom gegee het. Hy het klaarblyklik gedink Lucius sal dit nie waag om enigiets anders met die dagboek te doen as om dit noukeurig te bewaar nie, maar hy het te veel staatgemaak op Lucius se vrees vir 'n meester wat jare lank weg was en wat volgens Lucius dood was. Lucius het natuurlik nie geweet wat die dagboek in werklikheid is nie. Ek verstaan Voldemort het vir hom gesê die dagboek sal die Kamer van Geheime Nis weer laat oopgaan, want dit het slim towerspreuke bevat. As Lucius geweet het hy hou 'n deel van sy meester se siel in sy hande sou hy dit ongetwyfeld met meer ontsag behandel het – maar pleks daarvan het hy voortgegaan en die plan uitgevoer om sy eie doelwit te bereik: hy het dit op Arthur Weasley se dogter geplant in die hoop dat hy Arthur in onguns kan bring, my by Hogwarts uitgegooi kan kry en van 'n hoogs inkriminerende voorwerp ontslae kan raak, alles op een slag. Die arme Lucius ... ná Voldemort se toorn oor die feit dat hy die Horcrux vir sy eie gewin gebruik het en verlede jaar se fiasco by die Ministerie sal dit my nie verbaas as hy in sy enigheid bly is om voorlopig veilig in Azkaban te sit nie."

Harry dink vir 'n oomblik na en vra dan: "So as al sy Horcruxe vernietig is, sal 'n mens Voldemort kan doodmaak?"

"Ja, ek dink so," sê Dumbledore. "Sonder sy Horcruxe sal Voldemort 'n sterflike mens met 'n verminkte en verskraalde siel wees. Maar moet nooit vergeet nie, al is sy siel onherstelbaar beskadig, bly sy brein en sy magiese krag ongeskonde. Dit sal ongewone vaardigheid

en krag verg om 'n towenaar soos Voldemort dood te maak, selfs al is hy sy Horcruxe kwyt."

"Maar ek het nie ongewone vaardighede en krag nie," sê Harry voor hy homself kan keer.

"Ja, jy het," sê Dumbledore beslis. "Jy beskik oor 'n krag wat Voldemort nog nooit gehad het nie. Jy kan –"

"Ek weet!" sê Harry ongeduldig. "Ek kan liefhê!" Dis met groot moeite dat hy homself keer om by te voeg: "Maar dis niks watwonders nie!"

"Ja, Harry, jy kan liefhê," sê Dumbledore, wat lyk of hy maar alte goed weet wat Harry homself weerhou het om te sê. "En, gedagtig aan alles wat al met jou gebeur het, is dit iets groots en merkwaardigs. Jy is nog te jonk om te verstaan hoe ongewoon jy is, Harry."

"So, as die profesie sê ek beskik oor 'krag wat die Donker Heer nie ken nie' praat dit maar net van – liefde?" vra Harry en voel effens in die steek gelaat.

"Ja – net liefde," sê Dumbledore. "Maar Harry, onthou altyd, dit wat die profesie sê, is net betekenisvol omdat Voldemort dit so maak. Ek het dit vir jou aan die einde van verlede jaar gesê. Voldemort het jou uitgesonder as die persoon wat vir hom die gevaarlikste is – en deur dit te doen, *maak* hy jou die persoon wat vir hom die gevaarlikste is!"

"Maar dit kom neer op dieselfde –"

"Nee, glad nie!" sê Dumbledore en klink nou ongeduldig. Hy wys met sy swart, verdorpe hand na Harry en sê: "Jy heg te veel waarde aan die profesie!"

"Maar," stotter Harry, "maar u het gesê die profesie beteken –"

"Gestel Voldemort het nooit van die profesie gehoor nie? Sou dit dan vervul geword het? Sou dit dan enigiets beteken het? Natuurlik nie! Dink jy enige profesie in die Saal van Profesieë is al vervul?"

"Maar," sê Harry verwilderd, "maar laas jaar het u gesê een van ons sal die ander een moet doodmaak –"

"Harry, Harry, dit is net omdat Voldemort 'n ernstige fout begaan het deur op professor Trelawney se woorde te reageer! As Voldemort jou pa nie vermoor het nie, sou hy dan so 'n woedende begeerte om wraak te neem in jou ontketen het? Natuurlik nie! As hy jou ma nie gedwing het om vir jou te sterf nie, sou hy dan nog vir jou 'n magiese beskerming gegee het waardeur hy nie kon dring nie? Natuurlik nie, Harry! Verstaan jy nie? Voldemort het self sy eie grootste vyand geskep, nes alle tiranne oral doen! Het jy enige idee hoe vrees tiranne die mense wat hulle onderdruk? Hulle almal besef daar sal eendag tussen hulle baie slagoffers iemand wees wat teen hulle gaan opstaan

en terugslaan. Voldemort is presies dieselfde! Hy was aanhoudend op die uitkyk vir iemand wat hom sou uitdaag. Hy het die profesie gehoor en dadelik tot aksie oorgegaan, met die gevolg dat hy die man wat die waarskynlikste sou wees om hom te vernietig met die hand uitgesoek en boonop vir hom unieke, dodelike wapens gegee het!”

“Maar –”

“Dit is noodsaaklik dat jy dit verstaan!” sê Dumbledore. Hy staan op en begin heen en weer deur die vertrek loop terwyl sy glinsterende kleed agter hom bolstaan; Harry het hom nog nooit so ontstig gesien nie. “Deur jou te probeer doodmaak, het Voldemort die merkwaardige persoon wat hier voor my sit, uitgesonder en vir hom die nodige gereedskap vir die taak gegee! Dit is Voldemort se skuld dat jy sy gedagtes kan lees, weet wat sy ambisies is, dat jy selfs die slangtaal waarin hy bevele gee, kan verstaan en nogtans, Harry, ten spyte van jou bevoorregte insig in Voldemort se wêreld (wat terloops ’n geskenk is waarvoor enige Doodseter moord sal pleeg), is jy nooit deur die Donker Kunste verlei nie en het jy nog nooit, nie eens vir een sekonde, die geringste begeerte getoon om een van Voldemort se volgelinge te word nie!”

“Natuurlik nie!” sê Harry verontwaardig. “Hy het my ma en pa doodgemaak!”

“Kortom gestel, word jy beskerm deur jou eie vermoë om te kan liefhê,” sê Dumbledore hard. “Dit is al wat ’n mens teen die verlokking van ’n mag soos Voldemort s’n kan beskerm! Ten spyte van al die versoekings wat jy moes verduur, al die lyding, het jou hart suiwer gebly, so suiwer soos toe jy op die ouderdom van elf by die spieël ingestaar het wat jou hartsbegeerte weerkaats het en dit net vir jou gewys het hoe om die Heer Voldemort te stuit, en nie hoe om onsterflikheid of weelde te bekom nie. Harry, het jy enige benul hoe min towenaars daar is wat sou gesien het wat jy in daardie spieël gesien het? Voldemort moes toe besef het met wie hy te doen het, maar hy het nie!”

“Hy weet egter nou. Jy het die Heer Voldemort se gedagtes betree sonder dat jy iets oorgekom het, maar hy kan nie besit van jou neem sonder om ondraaglike pyn te verduur nie, soos wat hy in die Ministerie ontdek het. Ek dink nie hy verstaan hoekom nie, Harry, maar hy was só haastig om sy eie siel te vermink dat hy nooit besin het oor watter ongeëwenaarde krag ’n siel beskik wat onbevlek en heel is nie.”

“Maar professor,” sê Harry en probeer moedig om nie teëpraterig te klink nie, “dit kom alles op dieselfde ding neer, of hoe? Ek moet hom probeer doodmaak, of –”

“Moet?” sê Dumbledore. “Natuurlik moet jy! Maar nie oor die profesie nie! Want jy, jy wat Harry is, sal nooit rus voor jy nie probeer het nie! Ons albei weet dit. Verbeel jou vir ’n oomblik jy het daai profesie nooit gehoor nie. Hoe sal jy dan oor Voldemort voel? Dink bietjie!”

Harry kyk vir Dumbledore wat op en af voor hom verbystap en hy dink. Hy dink aan sy ma, sy pa en Sirius. Hy dink aan Cedric Diggory. Hy dink aan al die verskriklike dade wat hy weet die Heer Voldemort gepleeg het. Daar skiet ’n vlam in sy borskas op en dit brand sy keel.

“Ek sal hom wil doodhê,” sê Harry sag. “En ek sal dit wil doen.”

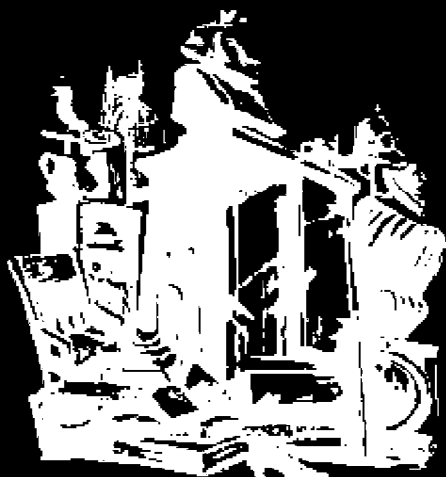
“Natuurlik sal jy!” roep Dumbledore uit. “Jy sien, die profesie beteken nie jy *moet* enigiets doen nie! Maar die profesie het veroorsaak dat die Heer Voldemort jou *as sy gelyke merk* ... met ander woorde, dit staan jou vry om jou eie pad te kies, totaal vry om jou rug op die profesie te keer! Maar Voldemort bly nog steeds behep met die profesie. Hy sal aanhou jag maak op jou ... wat dit weliswaar ’n voldonge feit maak dat –”

“Dat een van ons die ander een op die ou end sal doodmaak,” sê Harry.

“Ja.”

Maar hy verstaan uiteindelik wat Dumbledore die hele tyd vir hom probeer sê. Hy weet nou dit is die verskil tussen iemand wat by die arena ingesleep en gedwing word om tot die dood toe te baklei en iemand wat met sy kop omhoog by die arena instap. Party mense sal miskien sê daar is min te kies tussen die twee maniere, maar Dumbledore weet – en ek ook, dink Harry terwyl daar ’n vurige trots in hom opwel, en my ouers het dit ook geweet – daar is ’n hemelsbreë verskil.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



SECTUMSEMPRA

Exhausted but delighted with his night's work, Harry told Ron and Hermione everything that had happened during next morning's Charms lesson (having first cast the *Muffliato* spell upon those nearest them). They were both satisfyingly impressed by the way he had wheedled the memory out of Slughorn and positively awed when he told them about Voldemort's Horcruxes and Dumbledore's promise to take Harry along, should he find another one.

"Wow," said Ron, when Harry had finally finished telling them

everything; Ron was waving his wand very vaguely in the direction of the ceiling without paying the slightest bit of attention to what he was doing. “Wow. You’re actually going to go with Dumbledore . . . and try and destroy . . . wow.”

“Ron, you’re making it snow,” said Hermione patiently, grabbing his wrist and redirecting his wand away from the ceiling from which, sure enough, large white flakes had started to fall. Lavender Brown, Harry noticed, glared at Hermione from a neighboring table through very red eyes, and Hermione immediately let go of Ron’s arm.

“Oh yeah,” said Ron, looking down at his shoulders in vague surprise. “Sorry . . . looks like we’ve all got horrible dandruff now. . . .”

He brushed some of the fake snow off Hermione’s shoulder. Lavender burst into tears. Ron looked immensely guilty and turned his back on her.

“We split up,” he told Harry out of the corner of his mouth. “Last night. When she saw me coming out of the dormitory with Hermione. Obviously she couldn’t see you, so she thought it had just been the two of us.”

“Ah,” said Harry. “Well — you don’t mind it’s over, do you?”

“No,” Ron admitted. “It was pretty bad while she was yelling, but at least I didn’t have to finish it.”

“Coward,” said Hermione, though she looked amused. “Well, it was a bad night for romance all around. Ginny and Dean split up too, Harry.”

Harry thought there was a rather knowing look in her eye as she told him that, but she could not possibly know that his insides were

suddenly dancing the conga. Keeping his face as immobile and his voice as indifferent as he could, he asked, “How come?”

“Oh, something really silly . . . She said he was always trying to help her through the portrait hole, like she couldn’t climb in herself . . . but they’ve been a bit rocky for ages.”

Harry glanced over at Dean on the other side of the classroom. He certainly looked unhappy.

“Of course, this puts you in a bit of a dilemma, doesn’t it?” said Hermione.

“What d’you mean?” said Harry quickly.

“The Quidditch team,” said Hermione. “If Ginny and Dean aren’t speaking . . .”

“Oh — oh yeah,” said Harry.

“Flitwick,” said Ron in a warning tone. The tiny little Charms master was bobbing his way toward them, and Hermione was the only one who had managed to turn vinegar into wine; her glass flask was full of deep crimson liquid, whereas the contents of Harry’s and Ron’s were still murky brown.

“Now, now, boys,” squeaked Professor Flitwick reproachfully. “A little less talk, a little more action . . . Let me see you try. . . .”

Together they raised their wands, concentrating with all their might, and pointed them at their flasks. Harry’s vinegar turned to ice; Ron’s flask exploded.

“Yes . . . for homework,” said Professor Flitwick, reemerging from under the table and pulling shards of glass out of the top of his hat, “*practice.*”

They had one of their rare joint free periods after Charms and

walked back to the common room together. Ron seemed to be positively lighthearted about the end of his relationship with Lavender, and Hermione seemed cheery too, though when asked what she was grinning about she simply said, “It’s a nice day.” Neither of them seemed to have noticed that a fierce battle was raging inside Harry’s brain:

She’s Ron’s sister.

But she’s ditched Dean!

She’s still Ron’s sister.

I’m his best mate!

That’ll make it worse.

If I talked to him first —

He’d hit you.

What if I don’t care?

He’s your best mate!

Harry barely noticed that they were climbing through the portrait hole into the sunny common room, and only vaguely registered the small group of seventh years clustered together there, until Hermione cried, “Katie! You’re back! Are you okay?”

Harry stared: It was indeed Katie Bell, looking completely healthy and surrounded by her jubilant friends.

“I’m really well!” she said happily. “They let me out of St. Mungo’s on Monday, I had a couple of days at home with Mum and Dad and then came back here this morning. Leanne was just telling me about McLaggen and the last match, Harry. . . .”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “well, now you’re back and Ron’s fit, we’ll have a decent chance of thrashing Ravenclaw, which means we could

still be in the running for the Cup. Listen, Katie . . .”

He had to put the question to her at once; his curiosity even drove Ginny temporarily from his brain. He dropped his voice as Katie’s friends started gathering up their things; apparently they were late for Transfiguration.

“ . . . that necklace . . . can you remember who gave it to you now?”

“No,” said Katie, shaking her head ruefully. “Everyone’s been asking me, but I haven’t got a clue. The last thing I remember was walking into the ladies’ in the Three Broomsticks.”

“You definitely went into the bathroom, then?” said Hermione.

“Well, I know I pushed open the door,” said Katie, “so I suppose whoever Imperiused me was standing just behind it. After that, my memory’s a blank until about two weeks ago in St. Mungo’s. Listen, I’d better go, I wouldn’t put it past McGonagall to give me lines even if it is my first day back. . . .”

She caught up her bag and books and hurried after her friends, leaving Harry, Ron, and Hermione to sit down at a window table and ponder what she had told them.

“So it must have been a girl or a woman who gave Katie the necklace,” said Hermione, “to be in the ladies’ bathroom.”

“Or someone who looked like a girl or a woman,” said Harry. “Don’t forget, there was a cauldron full of Polyjuice Potion at Hogwarts. We know some of it got stolen. . . .”

In his mind’s eye, he watched a parade of Crabbes and Goyles prance past, all transformed into girls.

“I think I’m going to take another swig of Felix,” said Harry, “and have a go at the Room of Requirement again.”

“That would be a complete waste of potion,” said Hermione flatly, putting down the copy of *Spellman’s Syllabary* she had just taken out of her bag. “Luck can only get you so far, Harry. The situation with Slughorn was different; you always had the ability to persuade him, you just needed to tweak the circumstances a bit. Luck isn’t enough to get you through a powerful enchantment, though. Don’t go wasting the rest of that potion! You’ll need all the luck you can get if Dumbledore takes you along with him . . .” She dropped her voice to a whisper.

“Couldn’t we make some more?” Ron asked Harry, ignoring Hermione. “It’d be great to have a stock of it. . . . Have a look in the book . . .”

Harry pulled his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* out of his bag and looked up Felix Felicis.

“Blimey, it’s seriously complicated,” he said, running an eye down the list of ingredients. “And it takes six months . . . You’ve got to let it stew. . . .”

“Typical,” said Ron.

Harry was about to put his book away again when he noticed the corner of a page folded down; turning to it, he saw the *Sectumsempra* spell, captioned “For Enemies,” that he had marked a few weeks previously. He had still not found out what it did, mainly because he did not want to test it around Hermione, but he was considering trying it out on McLaggen next time he came up behind him unawares.

The only person who was not particularly pleased to see Katie Bell back at school was Dean Thomas, because he would no longer be required to fill her place as Chaser. He took the blow stoically enough when Harry told him, merely grunting and shrugging, but

Harry had the distinct feeling as he walked away that Dean and Seamus were muttering mutinously behind his back.

The following fortnight saw the best Quidditch practices Harry had known as Captain. His team was so pleased to be rid of McLaggen, so glad to have Katie back at last, that they were flying extremely well.

Ginny did not seem at all upset about the breakup with Dean; on the contrary, she was the life and soul of the team. Her imitations of Ron anxiously bobbing up and down in front of the goalposts as the Quaffle sped toward him, or of Harry bellowing orders at McLaggen before being knocked out cold, kept them all highly amused. Harry, laughing with the others, was glad to have an innocent reason to look at Ginny; he had received several more Bludger injuries during practice because he had not been keeping his eyes on the Snitch.

The battle still raged inside his head: *Ginny or Ron?* Sometimes he thought that the post-Lavender Ron might not mind too much if he asked Ginny out, but then he remembered Ron's expression when he had seen her kissing Dean, and was sure that Ron would consider it base treachery if Harry so much as held her hand. . . .

Yet Harry could not help himself talking to Ginny, laughing with her, walking back from practice with her; however much his conscience ached, he found himself wondering how best to get her on her own. It would have been ideal if Slughorn had given another of his little parties, for Ron would not be around — but unfortunately, Slughorn seemed to have given them up. Once or twice Harry considered asking for Hermione's help, but he did not think he could stand seeing the smug look on her face; he thought he caught it

sometimes when Hermione spotted him staring at Ginny or laughing at her jokes. And to complicate matters, he had the nagging worry that if he didn't do it, somebody else was sure to ask Ginny out soon: He and Ron were at least agreed on the fact that she was too popular for her own good.

All in all, the temptation to take another gulp of Felix Felicis was becoming stronger by the day, for surely this was a case for, as Hermione put it, "tweaking the circumstances"? The balmy days slid gently through May, and Ron seemed to be there at Harry's shoulder every time he saw Ginny. Harry found himself longing for a stroke of luck that would somehow cause Ron to realize that nothing would make him happier than his best friend and his sister falling for each other and to leave them alone together for longer than a few seconds. There seemed no chance of either while the final Quidditch game of the season was looming; Ron wanted to talk tactics with Harry all the time and had little thought for anything else.

Ron was not unique in this respect; interest in the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw game was running extremely high throughout the school, for the match would decide the Championship, which was still wide open. If Gryffindor beat Ravenclaw by a margin of three hundred points (a tall order, and yet Harry had never known his team to fly better) then they would win the Championship. If they won by less than three hundred points, they would come second to Ravenclaw; if they lost by a hundred points they would be third behind Hufflepuff and if they lost by more than a hundred, they would be in fourth place and nobody, Harry thought, would ever, ever let him forget that it had been he who had captained Gryffindor to their first bottom-of-the-

table defeat in two centuries.

The run-up to this crucial match had all the usual features: members of rival Houses attempting to intimidate opposing teams in the corridors; unpleasant chants about individual players being rehearsed loudly as they passed; the team members themselves either swaggering around enjoying all the attention or else dashing into bathrooms between classes to throw up. Somehow, the game had become inextricably linked in Harry's mind with success or failure in his plans for Ginny. He could not help feeling that if they won by more than three hundred points, the scenes of euphoria and a nice loud after-match party might be just as good as a hearty swig of Felix Felicis.

In the midst of all his preoccupations, Harry had not forgotten his other ambition: finding out what Malfoy was up to in the Room of Requirement. He was still checking the Marauder's Map, and as he was unable to locate Malfoy on it, deduced that Malfoy was still spending plenty of time within the room. Although Harry was losing hope that he would ever succeed in getting inside the Room of Requirement, he attempted it whenever he was in the vicinity, but no matter how he reworded his request, the wall remained firmly doorless.

A few days before the match against Ravenclaw, Harry found himself walking down to dinner alone from the common room, Ron having rushed off into a nearby bathroom to throw up yet again, and Hermione having dashed off to see Professor Vector about a mistake she thought she might have made in her last Arithmancy essay. More out of habit than anything, Harry made his usual detour along the

seventh-floor corridor, checking the Marauder's Map as he went. For a moment he could not find Malfoy anywhere and assumed he must indeed be inside the Room of Requirement again, but then he saw Malfoy's tiny, labeled dot standing in a boys' bathroom on the floor below, accompanied, not by Crabbe or Goyle, but by Moaning Myrtle.

Harry only stopped staring at this unlikely coupling when he walked right into a suit of armor. The loud crash brought him out of his reverie; hurrying from the scene lest Filch turn up, he dashed down the marble staircase and along the passageway below. Outside the bathroom, he pressed his ear against the door. He could not hear anything. He very quietly pushed the door open.

Draco Malfoy was standing with his back to the door, his hands clutching either side of the sink, his white-blond head bowed.

"Don't," crooned Moaning Myrtle's voice from one of the cubicles. "Don't . . . tell me what's wrong . . . I can help you . . ."

"No one can help me," said Malfoy. His whole body was shaking. "I can't do it. . . . I can't. . . . It won't work . . . and unless I do it soon . . . he says he'll kill me. . . ."

And Harry realized, with a shock so huge it seemed to root him to the spot, that Malfoy was crying — actually crying — tears streaming down his pale face into the grimy basin. Malfoy gasped and gulped and then, with a great shudder, looked up into the cracked mirror and saw Harry staring at him over his shoulder.

Malfoy wheeled around, drawing his wand. Instinctively, Harry pulled out his own. Malfoy's hex missed Harry by inches, shattering the lamp on the wall beside him; Harry threw himself sideways,

thought *Levicorpus!* and flicked his wand, but Malfoy blocked the jinx and raised his wand for another —

“No! No! Stop it!” squealed Moaning Myrtle, her voice echoing loudly around the tiled room. “Stop! STOP!”

There was a loud bang and the bin behind Harry exploded; Harry attempted a Leg-Locker Curse that backfired off the wall behind Malfoy’s ear and smashed the cistern beneath Moaning Myrtle, who screamed loudly; water poured everywhere and Harry slipped as Malfoy, his face contorted, cried, “*Cruci —*”

“*SECTUMSEMPRA!*” bellowed Harry from the floor, waving his wand wildly.

Blood spurted from Malfoy’s face and chest as though he had been slashed with an invisible sword. He staggered backward and collapsed onto the waterlogged floor with a great splash, his wand falling from his limp right hand.

“No —” gasped Harry.

Slipping and staggering, Harry got to his feet and plunged toward Malfoy, whose face was now shining scarlet, his white hands scrabbling at his blood-soaked chest.

“No — I didn’t —”

Harry did not know what he was saying; he fell to his knees beside Malfoy, who was shaking uncontrollably in a pool of his own blood. Moaning Myrtle let out a deafening scream: “MURDER! MURDER IN THE BATHROOM! MURDER!”

The door banged open behind Harry and he looked up, terrified: Snape had burst into the room, his face livid. Pushing Harry roughly aside, he knelt over Malfoy, drew his wand, and traced it over the

deep wounds Harry's curse had made, muttering an incantation that sounded almost like song. The flow of blood seemed to ease; Snape wiped the residue from Malfoy's face and repeated his spell. Now the wounds seemed to be knitting.

Harry was still watching, horrified by what he had done, barely aware that he too was soaked in blood and water. Moaning Myrtle was still sobbing and wailing overhead. When Snape had performed his countercurse for the third time, he half-lifted Malfoy into a standing position.

"You need the hospital wing. There may be a certain amount of scarring, but if you take dittany immediately we might avoid even that. . . . Come. . . ."

He supported Malfoy across the bathroom, turning at the door to say in a voice of cold fury, "And you, Potter . . . You wait here for me."

It did not occur to Harry for a second to disobey. He stood up slowly, shaking, and looked down at the wet floor. There were bloodstains floating like crimson flowers across its surface. He could not even find it in himself to tell Moaning Myrtle to be quiet, as she continued to wail and sob with increasingly evident enjoyment.

Snape returned ten minutes later. He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

"Go," he said to Myrtle, and she swooped back into her toilet at once, leaving a ringing silence behind her.

"I didn't mean it to happen," said Harry at once. His voice echoed in the cold, watery space. "I didn't know what that spell did."

But Snape ignored this. "Apparently I underestimated you, Potter,"

he said quietly. “Who would have thought you knew such Dark Magic? Who taught you that spell?”

“I — read about it somewhere.”

“Where?”

“It was — a library book,” Harry invented wildly. “I can’t remember what it was call —”

“Liar,” said Snape. Harry’s throat went dry. He knew what Snape was going to do and he had never been able to prevent it. . . .

The bathroom seemed to shimmer before his eyes; he struggled to block out all thought, but try as he might, the Half-Blood Prince’s copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* swam hazily to the forefront of his mind.

And then he was staring at Snape again, in the midst of this wrecked, soaked bathroom. He stared into Snape’s black eyes, hoping against hope that Snape had not seen what he feared, but —

“Bring me your schoolbag,” said Snape softly, “and all of your schoolbooks. *All* of them. Bring them to me here. Now!”

There was no point arguing. Harry turned at once and splashed out of the bathroom. Once in the corridor, he broke into a run toward Gryffindor Tower. Most people were walking the other way; they gaped at him, drenched in water and blood, but he answered none of the questions fired at him as he ran past.

He felt stunned; it was as though a beloved pet had turned suddenly savage; what had the Prince been thinking to copy such a spell into his book? And what would happen when Snape saw it? Would he tell Slughorn — Harry’s stomach churned — how Harry had been achieving such good results in Potions all year? Would he confiscate

or destroy the book that had taught Harry so much . . . the book that had become a kind of guide and friend? Harry could not let it happen. . . . He could not . . .

“Where’ve you — ? Why are you soaking — ? Is that *blood*?”

Ron was standing at the top of the stairs, looking bewildered at the sight of Harry.

“I need your book,” Harry panted. “Your Potions book. Quick . . . give it to me . . .”

“But what about the Half-Blood —”

“I’ll explain later!”

Ron pulled his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* out of his bag and handed it over; Harry sprinted off past him and back to the common room. Here, he seized his schoolbag, ignoring the amazed looks of several people who had already finished their dinner, threw himself back out of the portrait hole, and hurtled off along the seventh-floor corridor.

He skidded to a halt beside the tapestry of dancing trolls, closed his eyes, and began to walk.

I need a place to hide my book. . . . I need a place to hide my book. . . . I need a place to hide my book. . . .

Three times he walked up and down in front of the stretch of blank wall. When he opened his eyes, there it was at last: the door to the Room of Requirement. Harry wrenched it open, flung himself inside, and slammed it shut.

He gasped. Despite his haste, his panic, his fear of what awaited him back in the bathroom, he could not help but be overawed by what he was looking at. He was standing in a room the size of a large

cathedral, whose high windows were sending shafts of light down upon what looked like a city with towering walls, built of what Harry knew must be objects hidden by generations of Hogwarts inhabitants. There were alleyways and roads bordered by teetering piles of broken and damaged furniture, stowed away, perhaps, to hide the evidence of mishandled magic, or else hidden by castle-proud house-elves. There were thousands and thousands of books, no doubt banned or graffitied or stolen. There were winged catapults and Fanged Frisbees, some still with enough life in them to hover halfheartedly over the mountains of other forbidden items; there were chipped bottles of congealed potions, hats, jewels, cloaks; there were what looked like dragon eggshells, corked bottles whose contents still shimmered evilly, several rusting swords, and a heavy, bloodstained axe.

Harry hurried forward into one of the many alleyways between all this hidden treasure. He turned right past an enormous stuffed troll, ran on a short way, took a left at the broken Vanishing Cabinet in which Montague had got lost the previous year, finally pausing beside a large cupboard that seemed to have had acid thrown at its blistered surface. He opened one of the cupboard's creaking doors: It had already been used as a hiding place for something in a cage that had long since died; its skeleton had five legs. He stuffed the Half-Blood Prince's book behind the cage and slammed the door. He paused for a moment, his heart thumping horribly, gazing around at all the clutter. . . . Would he be able to find this spot again amidst all this junk? Seizing the chipped bust of an ugly old warlock from on top of a nearby crate, he stood it on top of the cupboard where the book was

now hidden, perched a dusty old wig and a tarnished tiara on the statue's head to make it more distinctive, then sprinted back through the alleyways of hidden junk as fast as he could go, back to the door, back out onto the corridor, where he slammed the door behind him, and it turned at once back into stone.

Harry ran flat-out toward the bathroom on the floor below, cramming Ron's copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* into his bag as he did so. A minute later, he was back in front of Snape, who held out his hand wordlessly for Harry's schoolbag. Harry handed it over, panting, a searing pain in his chest, and waited.

One by one, Snape extracted Harry's books and examined them. Finally, the only book left was the Potions book, which he looked at very carefully before speaking.

"This is your copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, is it, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, still breathing hard.

"You're quite sure of that, are you, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, with a touch more defiance.

"This is the copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* that you purchased from Flourish and Blotts?"

"Yes," said Harry firmly.

"Then why," asked Snape, "does it have the name 'Roonil Wazlib' written inside the front cover?"

Harry's heart missed a beat. "That's my nickname," he said.

"Your nickname," repeated Snape.

"Yeah . . . that's what my friends call me," said Harry.

"I understand what a nickname is," said Snape. The cold, black eyes were boring once more into Harry's; he tried not to look into

them. *Close your mind. . . . Close your mind. . . .* But he had never learned how to do it properly. . . .

“Do you know what I think, Potter?” said Snape, very quietly. “I think that you are a liar and a cheat and that you deserve detention with me every Saturday until the end of term. What do you think, Potter?”

“I — I don’t agree, sir,” said Harry, still refusing to look into Snape’s eyes.

“Well, we shall see how you feel after your detentions,” said Snape. “Ten o’clock Saturday morning, Potter. My office.”

“But sir . . .” said Harry, looking up desperately. “Quidditch . . . the last match of the . . .”

“Ten o’clock,” whispered Snape, with a smile that showed his yellow teeth. “Poor Gryffindor . . . fourth place this year, I fear . . .”

And he left the bathroom without another word, leaving Harry to stare into the cracked mirror, feeling sicker, he was sure, than Ron had ever felt in his life.

“I won’t say ‘I told you so,’” said Hermione, an hour later in the common room.

“Leave it, Hermione,” said Ron angrily.

Harry had never made it to dinner; he had no appetite at all. He had just finished telling Ron, Hermione, and Ginny what had happened, not that there seemed to have been much need. The news had traveled very fast: Apparently Moaning Myrtle had taken it upon herself to pop up in every bathroom in the castle to tell the story; Malfoy had already been visited in the hospital wing by Pansy Parkinson, who had lost no time in vilifying Harry far and wide, and

Snape had told the staff precisely what had happened. Harry had already been called out of the common room to endure fifteen highly unpleasant minutes in the company of Professor McGonagall, who had told him he was lucky not to have been expelled and that she supported wholeheartedly Snape's punishment of detention every Saturday until the end of term.

"I told you there was something wrong with that Prince person," Hermione said, evidently unable to stop herself. "And I was right, wasn't I?"

"No, I don't think you were," said Harry stubbornly.

He was having a bad enough time without Hermione lecturing him; the looks on the Gryffindor team's faces when he had told them he would not be able to play on Saturday had been the worst punishment of all. He could feel Ginny's eyes on him now but did not meet them; he did not want to see disappointment or anger there. He had just told her that she would be playing Seeker on Saturday and that Dean would be rejoining the team as Chaser in her place. Perhaps, if they won, Ginny and Dean would make up during the post-match euphoria. . . . The thought went through Harry like an icy knife. . . .

"Harry," said Hermione, "how can you still stick up for that book when that spell —"

"Will you stop harping on about the book!" snapped Harry. "The Prince only copied it out! It's not like he was advising anyone to use it! For all we know, he was making a note of something that had been used against him!"

"I don't believe this," said Hermione. "You're actually defending —"

“I’m not defending what I did!” said Harry quickly. “I wish I hadn’t done it, and not just because I’ve got about a dozen detentions. You know I wouldn’t’ve used a spell like that, not even on Malfoy, but you can’t blame the Prince, he hadn’t written ‘try this out, it’s really good’ — he was just making notes for himself, wasn’t he, not for anyone else. . . .”

“Are you telling me,” said Hermione, “that you’re going to go back — ?”

“And get the book? Yeah, I am,” said Harry forcefully. “Listen, without the Prince I’d never have won the Felix Felicis. I’d never have known how to save Ron from poisoning, I’d never have —”

“— got a reputation for Potions brilliance you don’t deserve,” said Hermione nastily.

“Give it a rest, Hermione!” said Ginny, and Harry was so amazed, so grateful, he looked up. “By the sound of it, Malfoy was trying to use an Unforgivable Curse, you should be glad Harry had something good up his sleeve!”

“Well, of course I’m glad Harry wasn’t cursed!” said Hermione, clearly stung. “But you can’t call that Sectumsempra spell good, Ginny, look where it’s landed him! And I’d have thought, seeing what this has done to your chances in the match —”

“Oh, don’t start acting as though you understand Quidditch,” snapped Ginny, “you’ll only embarrass yourself.”

Harry and Ron stared: Hermione and Ginny, who had always got on together very well, were now sitting with their arms folded, glaring in opposite directions. Ron looked nervously at Harry, then snatched up a book at random and hid behind it. Harry, however,

little though he knew he deserved it, felt unbelievably cheerful all of a sudden, even though none of them spoke again for the rest of the evening.

His lightheartedness was short-lived. There were Slytherin taunts to be endured next day, not to mention much anger from fellow Gryffindors, who were most unhappy that their Captain had got himself banned from the final match of the season. By Saturday morning, whatever he might have told Hermione, Harry would have gladly exchanged all the Felix Felicis in the world to be walking down to the Quidditch pitch with Ron, Ginny, and the others. It was almost unbearable to turn away from the mass of students streaming out into the sunshine, all of them wearing rosettes and hats and brandishing banners and scarves, to descend the stone steps into the dungeons and walk until the distant sounds of the crowd were quite obliterated, knowing that he would not be able to hear a word of commentary or a cheer or groan.

“Ah, Potter,” said Snape, when Harry had knocked on his door and entered the unpleasantly familiar office that Snape, despite teaching floors above now, had not vacated; it was as dimly lit as ever and the same slimy dead objects were suspended in colored potions all around the walls. Ominously, there were many cobwebbed boxes piled on a table where Harry was clearly supposed to sit; they had an aura of tedious, hard, and pointless work about them.

“Mr. Filch has been looking for someone to clear out these old files,” said Snape softly. “They are the records of other Hogwarts wrongdoers and their punishments. Where the ink has grown faint, or the cards have suffered damage from mice, we would like you to

copy out the crimes and punishments afresh and, making sure that they are in alphabetical order, replace them in the boxes. You will not use magic.”

“Right, Professor,” said Harry, with as much contempt as he could put into the last three syllables.

“I thought you could start,” said Snape, a malicious smile on his lips, “with boxes one thousand and twelve to one thousand and fifty-six. You will find some familiar names in there, which should add interest to the task. Here, you see . . .”

He pulled out a card from one of the topmost boxes with a flourish and read, “*James Potter and Sirius Black. Apprehended using an illegal hex upon Bertram Aubrey. Aubrey’s head twice normal size. Double detention.*” Snape sneered. “It must be such a comfort to think that, though they are gone, a record of their great achievements remains. . . .”

Harry felt the familiar boiling sensation in the pit of his stomach. Biting his tongue to prevent himself retaliating, he sat down in front of the boxes and pulled one toward him.

It was, as Harry had anticipated, useless, boring work, punctuated (as Snape had clearly planned) with the regular jolt in the stomach that meant he had just read his father or Sirius’s names, usually coupled together in various petty misdeeds, occasionally accompanied by those of Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew. And while he copied out all their various offenses and punishments, he wondered what was going on outside, where the match would have just started . . . Ginny playing Seeker against Cho . . .

Harry glanced again and again at the large clock ticking on the

wall. It seemed to be moving half as fast as a regular clock; perhaps Snape had bewitched it to go extra slowly? He could not have been here for only half an hour . . . an hour . . . an hour and a half. . . .

Harry's stomach started rumbling when the clock showed half past twelve. Snape, who had not spoken at all since setting Harry his task, finally looked up at ten past one.

"I think that will do," he said coldly. "Mark the place you have reached. You will continue at ten o'clock next Saturday."

"Yes, sir."

Harry stuffed a bent card into the box at random and hurried out of the door before Snape could change his mind, racing back up the stone steps, straining his ears to hear a sound from the pitch, but all was quiet. . . . It was over, then. . . .

He hesitated outside the crowded Great Hall, then ran up the marble staircase; whether Gryffindor had won or lost, the team usually celebrated or commiserated in their own common room.

"*Quid agis?*" he said tentatively to the Fat Lady, wondering what he would find inside.

Her expression was unreadable as she replied, "You'll see."

And she swung forward.

A roar of celebration erupted from the hole behind her. Harry gaped as people began to scream at the sight of him; several hands pulled him into the room.

"We won!" yelled Ron, bounding into sight and brandishing the silver Cup at Harry. "We won! Four hundred and fifty to a hundred and forty! We won!"

Harry looked around; there was Ginny running toward him; she

had a hard, blazing look in her face as she threw her arms around him. And without thinking, without planning it, without worrying about the fact that fifty people were watching, Harry kissed her.

After several long moments — or it might have been half an hour — or possibly several sunlit days — they broke apart. The room had gone very quiet. Then several people wolf-whistled and there was an outbreak of nervous giggling. Harry looked over the top of Ginny's head to see Dean Thomas holding a shattered glass in his hand, and Romilda Vane looking as though she might throw something. Hermione was beaming, but Harry's eyes sought Ron. At last he found him, still clutching the Cup and wearing an expression appropriate to having been clubbed over the head. For a fraction of a second they looked at each other, then Ron gave a tiny jerk of the head that Harry understood to mean, *Well — if you must.*

The creature in his chest roaring in triumph, he grinned down at Ginny and gestured wordlessly out of the portrait hole. A long walk in the grounds seemed indicated, during which — if they had time — they might discuss the match.

Sectumsempra

Pootuit, maar in sy skik met sy werk die vorige nag, vertel Harry die volgende oggend in die Towerspreukklas vir Ron en Hermione wat alles gebeur het (natuurlik eers nadat hy die *Muffliato* oor almal om hulle uitgespreek het). Hulle is beïndruk met hoe hy Slughorn oor-gehaal het om vir hom die herinnering te gee en heeltemal verstom toe hy hulle van Voldemort se Horcruxe vertel en dat Dumbledore belowe het om Harry saam te neem as hy nog een opspoor.

“Wow,” sê Ron toe Harry uiteindelik alles vertel het. Ron swaai sy towerstaf so half in die rigting van die plafon sonder om die minste aandag te gee aan wat hy doen. “Wow. Jy gaan so wraggies saam met Dumbledore ... om dit te probeer vernietig ... Wow.”

“Ron, jy laat dit sneeu,” sê Hermione geduldig. Sy gryp sy gewrig en rig sy towerstaf weg van die plafon waaruit daar inderdaad groot wit sneeuvlokkies begin neerfladder. Harry sien hoe Lavender Brown Hermione van ’n naburige tafel af met baie rooi oë aangeluur en Hermione los Ron se arm dadelik.

“O ja,” sê Ron en kyk effens verbaas na sy skouers. “’Skuus ... Nou lyk dit of ons almal vreeslik skilfers het ...”

Hy vee van die sneeuvlokkies van Hermione se skouer af. Lavender bars in trane uit. Ron lyk geweldig skuldig en draai sy rug op haar.

“Ons het uitgemaak,” sê hy uit die hoek van sy mond vir Harry. “Gisteraand. Toe sy my saam met Hermione by die slaapsaal sien uitkom het. Sy kon jou natuurlik nie sien nie, so sy’t gedink dit was net ons twee.”

“A,” sê Harry. “Wel, jy’s nie spyt dis verby nie, is jy?”

“Nee,” erken Ron. “Dit was nogal erg toe sy so op my skree, maar ten minste hoef ek haar toe nie af te gesê het nie.”

“Lafaard,” sê Hermione, al lyk sy geamuseerd. “Wel, dit was oor die algemeen maar ’n slegte aand vir romanse. Ginny en Dean het ook uitgemaak, Harry.”

Harry verbeel hom daar is ’n veelseggende kyk in haar oë toe sy dit vir hom sê, maar sy kan tog onmoontlik nie weet sy binnegoed

dans skielik die conga nie. Hy hou sy gesig so uitdrukkingloos en sy stem so ongeërg as wat hy kan en vra: "Hoekom?"

"Og, sommer iets baie simpels ... Sy sê hy't haar probeer help om deur die portretopening te klim, asof sy dit nie op haar eie kan doen nie ... maar hulle is nou al vir hoe lank krappertig met mekaar."

Harry loer oor sy skouers na Dean, wat aan die ander kant van die klaskamer sit. Hy lyk beslis ongelukkig.

"Dit plaas jou natuurlik in 'n dilemma," sê Hermione.

"Wat bedoel jy?" vra Harry vinnig.

"Die Kwiddiekspeel," sê Hermione. "As Ginny en Dean nie meer met mekaar praat nie ..."

"O – o ja," sê Harry.

"Flitwick," waarsku Ron. Die klein Towerspreukmeester kom na hulle toe aangetrippel. Hermione is die enigste een wat dit kon regkry om asyn in wyn te verander; haar glasfles is gevul met 'n dieprooi vloeistof terwyl Harry en Ron s'n nog steeks modderbruin is.

"Toe, toe, seuns," piep professor Flitwick vermanend. "'n Bietjie minder gesels, 'n bietjie meer doen ... Probeer, laat ek sien ..."

Hulle lig hul towerstawe saam, konsentreer met alle mag en rig die stawe op hul flesse. Harry se asyn verander in ys en Ron se fles ontplof.

"Reg ... vir huiswerk ..." sê professor Flitwick toe hy weer onder die tafel uitkom en glasskerwe uit die punt van sy hoed haal, "oefen."

Ná Towerspreuke het hulle een van hul min af-periodes en die driestuks loop saam geselskamer toe. Ron is in die wolke oor die einde van sy verhouding met Lavender en Hermione lyk ook opgewek, maar toe Ron haar vra hoekom sy so loop en glimlag, sê sy net: "Dis 'n mooi dag." Nie een van hulle weet blykbaar van die woeste tweestryd in Harry se kop nie:

Sy's Ron se suster.

Maar sy't Dean gelos!

Sy's nog steeds Ron se suster.

Ek is sy beste pël!

Dit sal dit erger maak.

Ek sal eers met hom praat –

Hy sal jou foeter.

En sê nou ek gee nie om nie?

Hy's jou beste pël!

Harry kom skaars agter dat hulle deur die portretopening klim en dat hulle nou in die sonnige geselskamer is. Hy registreer skaars

die klein groepie sewendejaars wat in 'n bondel saam sit, totdat Hermione uitroep: "Katie! Jy's terug! Is jy oukei?"

Harry staar na haar: Dit is sowaar Katie Bell, blakend gesond en omring deur haar verheugde vriende.

"Dit gaan baie goed met my!" sê sy vrolik. "Hulle het my Maandag uit Sint Mungo ontslaan, toe't ek 'n paar dae by die huis by my ma en pa gekuier en vanoggend terug skool toe gekom. Leanne het my nou net van McLaggen en die laaste wedstryd vertel, Harry ..."

"Ja," sê Harry, "wel, nou is jy terug en Ron is ook weer gesond, ons het dus 'n goeie kans om Raweklou ordentlik kaf te draf, wat sal beteken dat ons nog die Beker kan wen. Luister, Katie ..."

Hy moet haar eenvoudig dadelik vra; sy nuuskierigheid laat hom selfs voorlopig van Ginny vergeet. Harry laat sak sy stem terwyl Katie se vriende hul goed begin optel; hulle is blykbaar laat vir Transfigurasië.

"... daardie halssnoer ... Kan jy nou onthou wie dit vir jou gegee het?"

"Nee," sê Katie en skud spyt haar kop. "Almal vra my aanhoudend, maar ek het nie 'n benul nie. Die laaste ding wat ek onthou, is dat ek by die Drie Besemstokke se dameskleedkamer ingeloop het."

"So jy's definitief by die kleedkamer in?" vra Hermione.

"Wel, ek weet ek het die deur oopgestoot," sê Katie, "so ek veronderstel wie ook al my gelimperius het, het daaragter gestaan. Daarna het my kop toegeslaan tot omtrent twee weke gelede in Sint Mungo. Luister, ek beter loop; dis my eerste dag terug, maar McGonagall sal my nog steeds uitskryfwerk gee ..."

Sy tel haar sak en boeke op en volg haar vriende haastig. Harry, Ron en Hermione gaan sit by die tafel langs die venster en dink na oor wat sy hulle vertel het.

"So dit moes 'n meisie of 'n vrou gewees het wat vir Katie die halssnoer gegee het," sê Hermione. "Want die persoon was in die dameskleedkamer."

"Of iemand wat soos 'n meisie of 'n vrou gelyk het," sê Harry. "Moenie vergeet nie; daar was 'n hele heksetel vol Polisouspaljas hier in Hogwarts en ons weet daar is daarvan gesteel ..."

Voor sy geestesoog sien hy 'n string Crabbes en Goyles wat almal in meisies verander het, verbyparadeer.

"Ek dink ek gaan nog 'n sluk van die Felix vat," sê Harry, "en weer by die Vertrek van Vereistes probeer inkom."

"Dit sal 'n totale vermorsing van die towerdrankie wees," sê Hermione beslis en sit die eksemplaar van *Towerspelsillabarium* wat sy nou net uit haar sak gehaal het, neer. "Geluk kan jou net so ver

bring, Harry. Die situasie met Slughorn was iets anders; jy't nog altyd oor die vermoë beskik om hom te oorreed, jy moes die omstandighede net 'n bietjie dokter. Maar geluk is nie genoeg om 'n magtige towerspel te verbreek nie. Moenie die res van daai towerdrankie mors nie! Jy sal al die geluk in die wêreld nodig hê wanneer Dumbledore jou saam met hom neem ..." sê sy in 'n fluisterstem.

"Kan ons nie nog daarvan maak nie?" vra Ron vir Harry en ignoreer Hermione. "Dit sal *great* wees om 'n voorraad daarvan te hê ... Kyk gou in die boek ..."

Harry haal sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* uit sy sak en kyk die Felix Felicis op.

"Dêmmitt, dit lyk flippen ingewikkeld," sê hy terwyl sy oog met die lys bestanddele afbeweeg. "En dit vat ses maande ... Jy moet dit laat stowe ..."

"Tipies," sê Ron.

Harry wil sy boek net weer wegsit toe hy die bladsy met die omgevoorde hoek opmerk. Hy blaai soontoe en sien die *Sectumsempra*-spreuk onder die opskrif "Vir Vyande" wat hy 'n paar weke gelede gemerk het. Hy het nog steeds nie uitgevind wat dit doen nie, hoofsaaklik omdat hy dit nie in Hermione se teenwoordigheid wou uittoets nie, maar hy oorweeg dit ernstig om dit op McLaggen te probeer wanneer hy weer onverwags agter hom opduik.

Die enigste persoon wat nie besonder gelukkig is om Katie Bell weer by die skool te sien nie, is Dean Thomas, want hy weet hulle gaan hom nou nie meer in haar plek as Jaer nodig hê nie. Hy vat die slag gelate genoeg wanneer Harry hom dit meedeel, toe snork net en haal sy skouers op, maar toe Harry wegloop, kry hy die gevoel dat Dean en Seamus opstandig agter sy rug mompel.

Die volgende twee weke se Kwiddiekoefeninge is die beste sedert Harry Kaptein geword het. Sy span is só verlig om van McLaggen ontslae te wees en só bly dat Katie uiteindelik terug is dat hulle buitengewoon goed vlieg.

Ginny lyk glad nie ontsteld oor sy en Dean uitmekaar is nie; intendeel, sy is die siel van die span. Haar nabootsing van Ron wat angstig op en af voor die doelpale wip terwyl die Swelger op hom afpyl of van hoe Harry vir McLaggen bevele gebulder het voor hy katswink geslaan is, laat almal skater van die lag. Harry geniet dit saam met die ander en hy is bly daar is 'n onskuldige rede hoekom hy vir Ginny kan kyk; hy het gedurende hul oefensessies verskeie Swelgerbeserings opgedoen omdat hy nie sy oë op die Snip gehou het nie.

Die geveg in sy kop woed nog steeds voort: Ginny of Ron? Soms dink hy dat Ron ná Lavender nie soveel sal omgee as hy Ginny uitvra nie, maar dan onthou hy Ron se uitdrukking toe hy gesien het hoe sy Dean soen en Harry is seker Ron sal dit as lae, gemene verraad beskou as hy selfs net haar hand moet vashou ...

Maar Harry kan nie help om met Ginny te gesels, saam met haar te lag en ná hul oefening saam met haar terug te stap nie. Al keil sy gewete hom op, dink hy gedurig waar hy haar iewers op haar eie kan kry: Dit sal ideaal wees as Slughorn weer een van sy partytjies hou, want Ron sal nie daar wees nie – maar ongelukkig is Slughorn nie meer so sosiaal nie. Harry oorweeg dit een of twee keer om Hermione se hulp in te roep, maar hy dink nie hy sal die selfvoldane uitdrukking op haar gesig kan verdra nie; hy verbeel hom hy sien dit soms wanneer Hermione kyk hoe hy na Ginny staar of vir haar grappe lag. En om dinge nog meer ingewikkeld te maak, is hy knaend bekommerd dat as hy dit nie doen nie, iemand anders Ginny binnekort gaan uitvra; hy en Ron stem ten minste oor een ding saam: Sy is gans te gewild vir haar eie beswil.

Alles in ag genome word die versoeking om nog 'n sluk van die Felix Felicis te neem by die dag groter, want dit is tog sekerlik 'n geval van, soos Hermione dit sal stel, “die omstandighede net 'n bietjie dokter”? Die soel dae gly rustig deur Meimaand, en Ron is eenvoudig by elke keer dat Harry vir Ginny sien. Harry smag na 'n geluiskoot wat Ron sal laat besef dat niks hom blyer sal maak as dat sy beste vriend en sy suster vir mekaar val nie en wat sal meebring dat hy hulle vir langer as 'n paar sekondes alleen sal los. Maar dit lyk onmoontlik, want die seisoen se Kwiddiekeindwedstryd is om die draai; Ron wil die hele tyd taktiek met Harry bespreek en dink nie aan enigiets anders nie.

Ron is nie uniek in hierdie opsig nie; daar is oral in die skool geweldige belangstelling in die Gryffindor-Raweklou-wedstryd wat sal bepaal wie die kampioenskap wen, want dit kan in hierdie stadium nog enigteen van die twee wees. As Gryffindor Raweklou met driehonderd punte verslaan (dis baie gevra, maar Harry se span het nog nooit beter gevlieg nie), sal hulle die kampioenskap wen. As hulle met minder as driehonderd punte wen, sal hulle tweede kom en Raweklou eerste; as hulle met honderd punte verloor, sal hulle derde ná Hoesenproes wees en as hulle met meer as honderd verloor, sal hulle in die vierde plek eindig en dan, dink Harry, sal niemand hom ooit in der ewigheid laat vergeet dat Gryffindor met hom as kaptein vir die eerste keer in twee eeue heel laaste geëindig het nie.

Die opbou na hierdie beslissende wedstryd gaan met die gewone sirkus gepaard; lede van die wedywerende huise probeer mekaar in die gange intimideer, onsmaklike liedjies oor individuele spelers word hardop geoefen wanneer hulle verbystap, die spanlede self pronk óf windmakerig rond en geniet al die aandag óf storm tussen klasse by die kleedkamers in om te gaan opgooi. Op die een of ander manier is die wedstryd in Harry se kop onlosmaaklik verbind aan sukses of mislukking wat betref sy planne met Ginny. Hy is seker as hulle met meer as driehonderd punte wen, sal die tonele van ekstase en 'n lekker luidrugtige partytjie ná die wedstryd net so 'n goeie uitwerking soos 'n groot sluk van die Felix Felicis op hom hê.

Maar te midde van al hierdie dinge het Harry nie van sy ander ambisie vergeet nie: om uit te vind wat Malfoy in die Vertrek van Vereistes aanvang. Hy hou die Plunderaar se Kaart nog steeds dop en aangesien hy Malfoy dikwels nie kan opspoor nie, lei Harry af dat hy baie tyd in die Vertrek bestee. Harry begin al moed verloor dat hy dit ooit sal regkry om by die Vertrek in te kom. Hy probeer nog steeds elke keer dat hy in die omgewing is, maar al bewoord hy sy versoek ook hoe, die muur bly steeds deurloos.

'n Paar dae voor die wedstryd teen Raweklou loop Harry een aand alleen van die geselskamer af aandete toe; Ron het by 'n nabygeleë kleedkamer ingestorm om weer eens te gaan opgooi en Hermione het professor Vector gaan spreek oor 'n fout wat sy dink sy in haar laaste Rekenmatiektoets gemaak het. Meer uit gewoonte as enigiets anders, neem Harry sy gewone ompad met die sewende verdieping se gang langs terwyl hy die Plunderaar se Kaart raadpleeg. Vir 'n oomblik kan hy Malfoy nêrens kry nie en Harry neem aan hy is weer in die Vertrek van Vereistes, maar dan sien hy die klein kolletjie met Malfoy se naam op die etiket in die seunskleedkamer op die verdieping onder hom. Hierdie keer is Malfoy nie in Crabbe en Goyle se geselskap nie; hy is by Myrtle Martelgat.

Harry verstom hom so aan hierdie ongewone kombinasie dat hy in 'n wapenrusting vasloop. Die harde slag ruk hom uit sy mymering; hy gee haastig pad voor Fillis daar opdaag en hardloop met die marmertap af na die gang onder die Vertrek. Buite die badkamer druk hy sy oor teen die deur. Hy kan niks hoor nie. Hy stoot die deur saggies oop.

Draco Malfoy staan met sy rug na die deur; sy hande klem albei kante van die wasbak vas en sy witblonde kop is vooroor gebuig.

“Moenie,” kermkla Myrtle Martelgat se stem uit een van die hokkies. “Moenie ... Sê vir my wat is verkeerd ... Ek kan jou help ...”

“Niemand kan my help nie,” sê Malfoy. Sy hele liggaam bewe. “Ek kan dit nie doen nie ... Ek kan nie ... Dit wil nie werk nie ... en as ek dit nie vinnig doen nie ... sê hy hy gaan my doodmaak ...”

Met ’n skok wat so geweldig is dat hy nie kan beweeg nie, besef Harry Malfoy huil – hy huil sowaar – en die trane stroom oor sy bleek gesig tot in die vuil wasbak. Malfoy snak en sluk en toe, met ’n siddering, kyk hy op in die gekraakte spieël en sien oor sy skouer hoe Harry hom aanstaar.

Malfoy swaai om en pluk sy towerstaf uit. Instinktief gryp Harry syne ook. Malfoy se paljas mis Harry rakelings en laat breek die lamp teen die muur langs hom in stukkies. Harry spring opsy, dink *Levicorpus!* en swaai sy towerstaf, maar Malfoy weer die tower-spreuk af en lig sy towerstaf vir nog ’n –

“Nee! Nee! Hou op!” tjank Myrtle Martelgat en haar stem eggo hard deur die geteelde vertrek. “Hou op, HOU OP!”

Daar is ’n harde slag en die vullisblik agter Harry ontplof. Harry probeer ’n Beenklemvloek, maar dit slaan terug van die muur agter Malfoy se oor en breek die spoelbak onder Myrtle Martelgat flenters. Sy skree hard, die water spuit oor die vloer en Harry gly en verloor sy balans toe Malfoy met ’n verwronge gesig uitroep: “Cruci–”

“SECTUMSEMPRA!” brul Harry van die vloer af en swaai sy towerstaf wild.

Bloed spuit uit Malfoy se gesig en borskas asof hy met ’n onsigbare swaard oopgekerf is. Hy steier agteruit en slaan met ’n slag op die oorstroomde vloer neer; sy towerstaf val uit sy slap regterhand.

“Nee –” snak Harry.

Harry kom al glyende en sukkelende op die been en strompel vervaard tot by Malfoy wie se gesig nou skarlakenrooi blink terwyl sy wit hande na sy bloeddeurweekte borskas gryp.

“Nee – ek het nie –”

Harry weet nie wat hy sê nie; hy val op sy knieë neer langs Malfoy wat onbeheerbaar in ’n plas van sy eie bloed lê en ruk. Myrtle Martelgat gee ’n oorverdowende kreet.

“MOORD! MOORD IN DIE KLEEDKAMER! MOORD!”

Die deur bars oop agter Harry en hy kyk angsbevange op: Snape storm doodsbлек by die kleedkamer in. Hy stamp Harry ru opsy, kniel oor Malfoy, haal sy towerstaf uit en beweeg dit oor die diep wonde wat Harry se towerspreuk gemaak het terwyl hy ’n inkantasie wat amper soos ’n liedjie klink, prewel. Skielik loop die bloed minder; Snape vee Malfoy se gesig af en herhaal sy spreuk. Die wonde begin toegaan.

Harry kyk verstar toe, met afgryse vervul oor wat hy gedoen het, beswaarlik daarvan bewus dat hy ook met bloed en water deurdrenk is. Myrtle Martelgat snik en weeklaag nog eenstryk deur. Nadat Snape sy teenvloek vir die derde keer toegepas het, lig hy Malfoy op sy voete sodat hy kan staan.

“Jy moet siekeboeg toe gaan. Jy sal miskien ’n paar letsels oorhou, maar as ons dadelik vir jou essekruid gee, kan ons dit dalk voorkom ... Kom ...”

Hy stut Malfoy en lei hom by die kleedkamer uit; by die deur draai hy om en sê in ’n stem wat ysig van woede is: “En jy, Potter ... wag hier vir my.”

Harry dink nie vir ’n oomblik daaraan om hierdie bevel te verontagsaam nie. Hy staan stadig op en kyk bewend af na die nat vloer. Bloedkolle dryf soos helderrooi blomme op die oppervlak rond. Hy kry dit nie eens reg om vir Myrtle Martelgat te sê om stil te bly nie en sy hou aan om met toenemende genot te kerm en kla.

Tien minute later is Snape terug. Hy kom by die kleedkamer in en maak die deur agter hom toe.

“Gaan,” sê hy vir Myrtle en sy verdwyn dadelik by haar toilet af en laat ’n dawerende stilte agter.

“Ek wou nie hê dit moes gebeur nie,” sê Harry uiteindelik. Sy stem eggo in die koue, nat vertrek. “Ek het nie geweet wat daardie towerspreuk doen nie.”

Maar Snape ignoreer dit.

“Dit lyk my ek het jou onderskat, Potter,” sê hy sag. “Wie sou kon dink jy ken sulke Donker towerkuns? Waar kom jy aan daardie towerspreuk?”

“Ek – het iewers daarvan gelees.”

“Waar?”

“Dit was – in ’n biblioteekboek,” maak Harry wild iets op. “Ek kan nie die naam onthou nie –”

“Leuenaar,” sê Snerp. Harry se keel word droog. Hy weet wat Snape gaan doen en hy kon dit nog nooit keer nie ...

Die kleedkamer swem voor sy oë; hy probeer alle gedagtes uitsluit, maar al probeer hy ook hoe hard, sweef die Halfbloed Prins se eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* wasig tot voor in sy brein ...

En dan kyk hy weer na Snape in die middel van die verwoeste, oorstroomde kleedkamer. Hy staar in Snape se swart oë en hoop wanhopig Snape het nie dit wat hy so graag wil wegsteek, gesien nie, maar –

“Bring vir my jou skoolsak,” sis Snape, “en al jou skoolboeke. *Almal*. Bring hulle vir my hierheen. Nou!”

Dit is sinneloos om te argumenteer. Harry draai dadelik om en plas by die kleedkamer uit. Toe hy in die gang kom, begin hy Gryffindortoring toe hardloop. Die meeste mense loop in die ander rigting; hulle gaap hom aan en wil weet hoekom hy so met water en bloed deurweek is, maar hy antwoord nie en hou net aan met hardloop.

Harry is verbyster; hy voel soos iemand wie se geliefde troeteldier hom skielik gebyt het. Hoekom het die Prins so 'n towerspreuk in sy boek neergeskryf? En wat gaan gebeur wanneer Snape dit sien? Gaan hy vir Slughorn vertel – Harry se maag trek op 'n knop – hoe Harry heeljaar sulke goeie resultate in Towerdrankies behaal het? Gaan hy die boek waaruit Harry so baie geleer het, afneem of vernietig ... die boek wat vir Harry soos 'n gids en vriend geword het? Harry kan nie toelaat dat dit gebeur nie ... hy kan nie ...

“Waar was jy? Hoekom is jy so vol – ? Is dit *bloed*?”

Ron staan bo teen die trap en kyk Harry geskok aan.

“Ek het jou boek nodig,” hyg Harry. “Jou Towerdrankieboek. Gou ... gee dit vir my ...”

“Maar wat van die Halfbloed – ?”

“Ek sal later verduidelik!”

Ron haal sy eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* uit sy sak en gee dit vir Harry, wat dadelik by hom verbyskiet na die geselskamer toe. Hier gryp hy sy skoolsak, ignoreer die mense wat klaar by aandete was se verstomde kyke, skarrel by die portretopening uit en nael met die sewende verdieping se gang af.

Hy kom glyend langs die tapisserie van die dansende trolle tot stilstand, maak sy oë toe en begin heen en weer loop.

Ek moet 'n wegsteekplek vir my boek kry ... Ek moet 'n wegsteekplek vir my boek kry ... Ek moet 'n wegsteekplek vir my boek kry ...

Hy loop drie keer op en af voor die kaal stuk muur. Toe hy sy oë oopmaak, is dit uiteindelik daar: die deur na die Vertrek van Vereistes. Harry pluk dit oop, spring binnetoe en klap die deur toe.

Hy snak na asem. Ten spyte van sy haas, sy paniek, sy vrees vir wat daar in die kleedkamer vir hom voorlê, kan hy nie help om oorstelp te wees deur dit waarna hy kyk nie. Hy staan in 'n vertrek so groot soos 'n reusekatedraal, met hoë vensters wat ligkolomme werp op wat lyk soos 'n stad met toringhoë mure, gebou van wat Harry weet voorwerpe is wat geslagte van Hogwartsinwoners weggesteek het. Daar is stegies en gange omsoom met wankelende hope gebreekte of beskadigde meubels wat hier gebêre is om bewyse van verbroude towerspreuke te verdoesel of anders deur kasteeltrots huiselwe, wat die kasteel se inhoud wil beskerm, weggesteek is. Daar is duisende en derduisende boeke, ongetwyfeld verbied of bekrap of gesteel.

Daar is gevleuelde ketties en Vreetfrisbees waarvan party nog genoeg lewe in hulle oorhet om halfhartig oor die berge ander verbode goed te sweef; daar is gekraakte bottels met gestolde towerdrankies in, hoedens, juwele, mantels; daar is wat lyk soos draakeierdoppe, kurkpropbottels met goed wat nog steeds boosaardig glinster, 'n hele paar geroeste swaarde en 'n swaar, bloedbevlekte byl.

Harry loop vinnig by een van die baie stegies tussen al hierdie weggesteekte skatte in. Hy draai regs by 'n enorme opgestopte trol, hardloop 'n entjie, draai dan links by die gebreekte Verdwynkabinet waarin Montague laas jaar verdwaal het en kom tot stilstand langs 'n groot hangkas met blase in die vernis wat lyk of daar suur oor uitgegooi is. Hy maak een van die kas se krakende deure oop: Dit word reeds gebruik as wegsteekplek vir iets in 'n hok wat lankal dood is; die geraamte het vyf bene. Hy druk die Halfbloed Prins se boek agter die hok in en klap die deur toe. Hy wag 'n oomblik, voel hoe verskriklik vinnig sy hart klop en kyk na die deurmekaarspul om hom ... Sal hy die plek ooit weer tussen al hierdie gemors kan kry? Hy gryp die gekepte borsbeeld van 'n lelike ou towenaar bo-op 'n krat en sit dit op die kas waarin die boek nou weggesteek is, dan plak hy 'n stowwerige ou pruik en 'n aangeslaande tiara op die beeld se kop om dit later meer herkenbaar te maak en nael so vinnig as wat hy kan terug deur die gange van weggesteekte rommel, terug na die deur en terug tot in die gang, waar hy die deur agter hom toeklap, en dit verander onmiddellik weer in klip.

Harry hardloop volspoed na die kleedkamer op die verdieping net onderkant terwyl hy Ron se eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* in sy sak stop. 'n Minuut of wat later staan hy weer voor Snape, wat sy hand woordeloos uithou sodat Harry sy skoolsak vir hom moet gee. Harry oorhandig dit uitasem en met 'n brandpyn in sy bors, en wag.

Snape haal Harry se boeke een vir een uit en bekyk hulle. Uiteindelik bly net die Towerdrankieboek oor; hy haal dit uit, bestudeer dit sorgvuldig en dan praat hy.

“Is dit jou eksemplaar van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies*, Potter?”

“Ja,” sê Harry, wat nog hard asemhaal.

“Is jy doodseker daarvan, Potter?”

“Ja,” sê Harry, 'n tikkie meer minagtend.

“Is dit die kopie van *Gevorderde Towerdrankies* wat jy by Sierskrif en Klatt gekoop het?”

“Ja,” sê Harry beslis.

“Nou hoekom,” vra Snape, “staan die naam ‘Rotnaald Weselesel’ dan op die binnekant van die voorblad geskryf?”

Harry se hart gaan staan amper.

“Dis my bynaam,” sê hy.

“Jou bynaam,” herhaal Snape.

“Ja ... dis wat my vriende my noem,” sê Harry.

“Ek weet wat ’n bynaam is,” sê Snape. Sy koue swart oë deurboor weer Harry s’n; hy probeer om nie in hulle te kyk nie. *Sluit jou gedagtes af ... sluit jou gedagtes af ...* maar hy kon dit nog nooit ordentlik regkry nie ...

“Weet jy wat dink ek, Potter?” vra Snape baie sag. “Ek dink jy’s ’n leuenaar en ’n bedrieër en jy verdien om elke Saterdag tot die einde van die kwartaal detensie by my te doen. Wat dink jy, Potter?”

“Ek – ek stem nie saam nie, professor,” sê Harry, wat nog steeds weier om Snape in die oë te kyk.

“Wel, ons sal sien hoe voel jy ná jou detensies,” sê Snape. “Tienuur Saterdagoggend, Potter. My kantoor.”

“Maar professor ...” sê Harry en kyk desperaat op. “Ons speel Kwiddiek ... die laaste wedstryd van die –”

“Tienuur,” fluister Snape en glimlag dat sy geel tande wys. “Arme Gryffindor ... Ek is bevrees julle gaan vanjaar vierde kom ...”

En hy stap sonder een verdere woord by die kleedkamer uit. Harry staar in die gekraakte spieël en is seker hy voel naarder as wat Ron nog ooit in sy lewe gevoel het.

“Ek sal nie sê: ‘Ek het jou mos gesê nie’”, sê Hermione ’n uur later in die geselskamer.

“Los dit, Hermione,” sê Ron kwaad.

Harry het nie vir aandete gegaan nie; hy het absoluut geen eetlus nie. Hy het so pas klaar vir Ron, Hermione en Ginny vertel wat gebeur het, nie dat dit enigsins nodig was nie. Die nuus het baie vinnig versprei: Blykbaar het Myrtle Martelgat dit haar plig geag om in elke kleedkamer in die kasteel kop uit te steek en die storie te vertel; Pansy Parkinson het reeds vir Malfoy in die siekeboeg gaan kuier en Harry se naam daarna wyd en syd swartgesmeer en Snape het vir die personeel vertel presies wat gebeur het: Harry is alreeds uit die geselskamer ontbied om vyftien uiters onaangename minute in professor McGonagall se teenwoordigheid deur te bring; volgens haar is hy gelukkig om nie geskors te word nie en het Snape haar heelhartige steun wat betref die Saterdagdetensies tot die einde van die kwartaal.

“Ek het jou gesê daar’s iets verkeerd met daai Prinspersoon,” sê Hermione, wat haarself oënskynlik nie kan keer nie. “En ek was reg, of hoe?”

“Nee, ek dink nie jy was nie,” sê Harry hardkoppig.

Dinge is erg genoeg; hy sien nie nog kans vir Hermione se gepreek ook nie. Die uitdrukkings op die Gryffindorspan se gesigte toe hy vir hulle vertel hy sal nie Saterdag kan speel nie, was vir hom die heel ergste straf. Hy voel Ginny se oë nou op hom, maar kyk nie na haar nie; hy wil nie haar teleurstelling of woede sien nie. Hy het net vir haar gesê sy moet Saterdag Soeker speel en dat Dean weer by die span sal aansluit om haar as Jaer te vervang. Miskien sal hulle wen en dan sal Ginny en Dean in die vreugde ná die wedstryd opmaak ... die gedagte sny soos 'n yskoue mes deur Harry ...

“Harry,” sê Hermione, “hoe kan jy nog vir daardie boek opkom as daai towerspreuk –”

“Hou nou op aangaan oor die boek!” snou Harry haar toe. “Die Prins het dit net daarin geskryf! Dis nie asof hy vir enigiemand gesê het om dit te gebruik nie! Vir al wat ons weet, het hy 'n nota gemaak van iets wat teen hom gebruik is!”

“Ek glo dit nie,” sê Hermione. “Jy verdedig sowaar –”

“Ek verdedig nie wat ek gedoen het nie!” kap Harry terug. “Ek wens ek het dit nie gedoen nie, en nie net omdat ek omtrent 'n half-dosyn detensies gekry het nie. Jy weet mos ek sou nie só 'n towerspreuk gebruik het nie, selfs nie teen Malfoy nie, maar jy kan nie die Prins daarvoor blameer nie; hy't nie geskryf: ‘Probeer dié een, dis regtig goed’ nie – hy het die notas net vir homself gemaak, nie vir enigiemand anders nie ...”

“En wil jy nou vir my sê,” vra Hermione, “jy gaan terug soontoe om – ?”

“Om die boek te kry? Ja, ek gaan,” sê Harry vurig. “Luister, sonder die Prins sou ek nooit die Felix Felicis gewen het nie. Ek sou Ron nooit kon red toe hy vergiftig is nie, ek sou nooit –”

“– 'n reputasie as die top Towerdrankiestudent verwerf het wat jy nie verdien nie,” sê Hermione bitsig.

“Dis nou genoeg, Hermione!” sê Ginny en Harry is so verstom, so dankbaar, dat hy opkyk. “Dit klink of Malfoy 'n Onvergeeflike Vloek wou gebruik, so jy moet bly wees Harry het iets goeds gehad om hom mee te verdedig!”

“Natuurlik is ek bly Harry is nie vervloek nie,” sê Hermione duidelik seergemaak, “maar jy kan daai *Sectumsepra*-spreuk nie ‘iets goeds’ noem nie, Ginny. Kyk waarin het dit hom laat beland! En ek sou dink, aangesien dit julle kanse in die wedstryd soveel benadeel –”

“Ag, moet nou nie maak of jy iets van Kwiddiek af weet nie,” haak Ginny af. “Jy sal net 'n gek van jouself maak.”

Harry en Ron gaap hulle aan: Hermione en Ginny wat altyd so

wonderlik klaargekom het, sit nou met hul arms gevou en gluur in teenoorgestelde rigtings. Ron kyk senuweeagtig vir Harry, gryp dan die eerste beste boek en kruip daaragter weg. Harry weet hy verdien dit nie, maar hy voel skielik ongelooflik vrolik, al praat nie een van hulle weer vir die res van die aand nie.

Maar sy opgewektheid is van korte duur. Die volgende dag moet hy die Slytherins se geterg verduur, om nie te praat van sy mede-Gryffindors se woede oor hulle kaptein hom so swak gedra het dat hy uit die seisoen se eindwedstryd geskors is nie. Ten spyte van wat hy vir Hermione gesê het, is Harry teen Saterdagoggend bereid om al die Felix Felicis in die wêreld te verruil vir die kans om saam met Ron, Ginny en die ander af na die Kwiddiekveld toe te loop. Dit is amper ondraaglik om weg te draai van die massa studente wat in die son uitstroom met hul rosette en hoedens en wapperende baniere en serpe, en met die kliptrap af te gaan tot onder in die kerker en aan te hou loop tot die veraf klanke van die skare heeltemal verdwyn en te weet hy sal nie 'n enkele woord van die kommentaar of 'n gejuig of gejou kan hoor nie.

"A, Potter," sê Snape ná Harry aan sy deur geklop en by die bekende kantoor met soveel slegte herinneringe ingekom het. Snape se klaskamer is nou bogronds, maar hy het hierdie kantoor nogtans nie ontruim nie; dit is so dof verlig soos altyd en dieselfde dooie voorwerpe hang orals teen die mure in gekleurde towerdrankies. 'n Klomp bokse vol spinnerakke is onheilspellend op mekaar gestapel op 'n tafel waarby Harry duidelik veronderstel is om te gaan sit; dit lyk na vervelige, harde en sinnelose werk.

"Meneer Filch soek lankal iemand om hierdie ou lêers uit te sorteer," sê Snape sag. "Dit is rekords van ander oortreders by Hogwarts en die straf wat hulle opgelê is. Waar die ink al verdof of die kaarte deur muise beskadig is, wil ons hê jy moet die oortredings en strawwe oorskryf, seker maak dit is in alfabetiese volgorde en dit dan terug in die bokse sit. Jy mag nie towerkrag gebruik nie."

"Reg, professor," sê Harry en sit soveel minagting moontlik in die laaste drie lettergrepe.

"Ek het gedink jy kan begin," sê Snape met 'n venynige glimlag, "met bokse eenduisend en twaalf tot eenduisend ses-en-vyftig. Jy sal 'n paar bekende name daarin aantref wat jou taak interessanter behoort te maak. Hier byvoorbeeld ..."

Met 'n swierige gebaar trek hy 'n kaart uit een van die boonste bokse en lees: *'James Potter en Sirius Black. Onwettige paljas op Bertram Aubrey gebruik. Aubrey se kop twee keer normale grootte. Dubbele detensie.'* Snape grynslag. "Dit moet 'n groot troos wees om

te weet dat, al is hulle weg, daar nog 'n rekord van hul groot prestasies agterbly ...”

Harry voel die bekende kooksensasie op die krop van sy maag. Hy byt op sy lip om nie terug te praat nie; hy gaan sit voor die bokse en trek een nader.

Dit is, nes Harry vermoed het, sinnelose, vervelige werk wat telkens onderbreek word (soos wat Snape duidelik beplan het) deur 'n steekpyn in sy bors wanneer hy sy pa en Sirius se name sien, gewoonlik saamgekoppel aan 'n verskeidenheid klein oortredings en soms saam met Remus Lupin en Peter Pettigrew se name. En terwyl hy al hul verskillende oortredings en strawwe oorskryf, wonder hy wat gaan buitekant aan. Want die wedstryd moet al begin het ... Ginny speel Soeker teen Cho ...

Harry loer oor en oor na die groot horlosie wat teen die muur tik. Dit is asof hierdie een twee keer stadiger as 'n gewone horlosie loop; miskien het Snape dit getoor om ekstra stadig te wees? Iets sê vir hom hy is al langer as 'n halfuur hier ... 'n uur ... 'n uur en 'n half ...

Harry se maag begin grom toe die horlosie wys dit is halfeen. Snape, wat nie 'n enkele woord gesê het vandat hy vir Harry sy taak gegee het nie, kyk teen tien oor een uiteindelik op.

“Ek dink dis genoeg,” sê hy kil. “Merk die plek waar jy is. Jy sal volgende Saterdag om tienuur hiermee voortgaan.”

“Ja, professor.”

Harry druk 'n gebuigde kaart sommer enige plek by die boks in en loop vinnig by die deur uit voor Snape van plan kan verander. Hy hardloop met die kliptrap op en probeer hard om iets van die veld af te hoor, maar dit is doodstil ... So, die wedstryd is al verby.

Hy huiwer buite die stampvol Groot Saal en hardloop dan by die marmertrap op; of Gryffindor nou wen of verloor, die span kom gewoonlik in hulle eie geselskamer bymekaar om fees te vier of hul wonde te lek.

“*Quid agis?*” vra hy aarselend vir die Vet Vrou en wonder wat hy binnekant gaan aantref.

Haar uitdrukking is onleesbaar wanneer sy antwoord: “Jy sal sien.” En sy swaai vorentoe.

'n Gebrul van feesviering bars uit die opening agter haar. Harry se mond val oop; almal skree toe hulle hom sien en verskeie hande trek hom by die vertrek in.

“Ons het gewen!” gil Ron, wat vorentoe spring en die silwer Beker voor Harry rondswaai. “Ons het gewen! Vierhonderd en vyftig teen honderd en veertig. Ons het gewen!”

Harry kyk om; Ginny kom na hom toe aangehardloop; met 'n

gloeiende uitdrukking op haar gesig gooi sy haar arms om hom. En sonder om te dink, sonder om dit te beplan, sonder om hom te steur aan die feit dat vyftig mense dit sien, soen Harry haar.

Ná 'n hele paar lang oomblikke – of miskien is dit 'n halfuur – of moontlik 'n hele klomp sonskyndae – los hulle mekaar. Dit is tjoepstil in die vertrek. Dan is daar 'n paar wolwefluite en 'n senuagtige gegiggel. Harry kyk oor Ginny se kop en sien Dean Thomas hou 'n gebreekte glas in sy hand vas en Romilda Vane lyk of sy iets wil gooi. Hermione straal, maar Harry se oë soek na Ron. Uiteindelik kry hy hom, nog steeds met die Beker in sy hand en 'n uitdrukking wat lyk of hy nou net oor die kop gemoker is. Hulle kyk 'n fraksie van 'n sekonde na mekaar en dan maak Ron 'n klein kopbeweging wat vir Harry sê: “Wel – as jy dan moet.”

Die monster in sy borskas juig triomfantlik. Harry grinnik, kyk af na Ginny en beduie woordeloos na die portretopening. Dit is tyd om 'n lang ent buite op die skoolgrond te gaan stap – en as hulle tyd het, dalk die wedstryd te bespreek.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



THE SEER OVERHEARD

The fact that Harry Potter was going out with Ginny Weasley seemed to interest a great number of people, most of them girls, yet Harry found himself newly and happily impervious to gossip over the next few weeks. After all, it made a very nice change to be talked about because of something that was making him happier than he could remember being for a very long time, rather than because he had been involved in horrific scenes of Dark Magic.

“You’d think people had better things to gossip about,” said Ginny, as she sat on the common room floor, leaning against Harry’s legs and reading the *Daily Prophet*. “Three dementor attacks in a week,

and all Romilda Vane does is ask me if it's true you've got a hippogriff tattooed across your chest."

Ron and Hermione both roared with laughter. Harry ignored them.

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her it's a Hungarian Horntail," said Ginny, turning a page of the newspaper idly. "Much more macho."

"Thanks," said Harry, grinning. "And what did you tell her Ron's got?"

"A Pygmy Puff, but I didn't say where."

Ron scowled as Hermione rolled around laughing.

"Watch it," he said, pointing warningly at Harry and Ginny. "Just because I've given my permission doesn't mean I can't withdraw it —"

"*Your permission,*" scoffed Ginny. "Since when did you give me permission to do anything? Anyway, you said yourself you'd rather it was Harry than Michael or Dean."

"Yeah, I would," said Ron grudgingly. "And just as long as you don't start snogging each other in public —"

"You filthy hypocrite! What about you and Lavender, thrashing around like a pair of eels all over the place?" demanded Ginny.

But Ron's tolerance was not to be tested much as they moved into June, for Harry and Ginny's time together was becoming increasingly restricted. Ginny's O.W.L.s were approaching and she was therefore forced to study for hours into the night. On one such evening, when Ginny had retired to the library, and Harry was sitting beside the window in the common room, supposedly finishing his Herbology homework but in reality reliving a particularly happy hour he had

spent down by the lake with Ginny at lunchtime, Hermione dropped into the seat between him and Ron with an unpleasantly purposeful look on her face.

“I want to talk to you, Harry.”

“What about?” said Harry suspiciously. Only the previous day, Hermione had told him off for distracting Ginny when she ought to be working hard for her examinations.

“The so-called Half-Blood Prince.”

“Oh, not again,” he groaned. “Will you please drop it?”

He had not dared to return to the Room of Requirement to retrieve his book, and his performance in Potions was suffering accordingly (though Slughorn, who approved of Ginny, had jocularly attributed this to Harry being lovesick). But Harry was sure that Snape had not yet given up hope of laying hands on the Prince’s book, and was determined to leave it where it was while Snape remained on the lookout.

“I’m not dropping it,” said Hermione firmly, “until you’ve heard me out. Now, I’ve been trying to find out a bit about who might make a hobby of inventing Dark spells —”

“He didn’t make a hobby of it —”

“He, he — who says it’s a he?”

“We’ve been through this,” said Harry crossly. “*Prince*, Hermione, *Prince*!”

“Right!” said Hermione, red patches blazing in her cheeks as she pulled a very old piece of newsprint out of her pocket and slammed it down on the table in front of Harry. “Look at that! Look at the picture!”

Harry picked up the crumbling piece of paper and stared at the moving photograph, yellowed with age; Ron leaned over for a look too. The picture showed a skinny girl of around fifteen. She was not pretty; she looked simultaneously cross and sullen, with heavy brows and a long, pallid face. Underneath the photograph was the caption: EILEEN PRINCE, CAPTAIN OF THE HOGWARTS GOBSTONES TEAM.

“So?” said Harry, scanning the short news item to which the picture belonged; it was a rather dull story about interschool competitions.

“Her name was Eileen Prince. *Prince*, Harry.”

They looked at each other, and Harry realized what Hermione was trying to say. He burst out laughing.

“No way.”

“What?”

“You think *she* was the Half-Blood . . . ? Oh, come on.”

“Well, why not? Harry, there aren’t any real princes in the Wizarding world! It’s either a nickname, a made-up title somebody’s given themselves, or it could be their actual name, couldn’t it? No, listen! If, say, her father was a wizard whose surname was Prince, and her mother was a Muggle, then that would make her a ‘half-blood Prince’!”

“Yeah, very ingenious, Hermione . . .”

“But it would! Maybe she was proud of being half a Prince!”

“Listen, Hermione, I can tell it’s not a girl. I can just tell.”

“The truth is that you don’t think a girl would have been clever enough,” said Hermione angrily.

“How can I have hung round with you for five years and not think

girls are clever?" said Harry, stung by this. "It's the way he writes, I just know the Prince was a bloke, I can tell. This girl hasn't got anything to do with it. Where did you get this anyway?"

"The library," said Hermione predictably. "There's a whole collection of old *Prophets* up there. Well, I'm going to find out more about Eileen Prince if I can."

"Enjoy yourself," said Harry irritably.

"I will," said Hermione. "And the first place I'll look," she shot at him, as she reached the portrait hole, "is records of old Potions awards!"

Harry scowled after her for a moment, then continued his contemplation of the darkening sky.

"She's just never got over you outperforming her in Potions," said Ron, returning to his copy of *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*.

"You don't think I'm mad, wanting that book back, do you?"

"Course not," said Ron robustly. "He was a genius, the Prince. Anyway . . . without his bezoar tip . . ." He drew his finger significantly across his own throat. "I wouldn't be here to discuss it, would I? I mean, I'm not saying that spell you used on Malfoy was great —"

"Nor am I," said Harry quickly.

"But he healed all right, didn't he? Back on his feet in no time."

"Yeah," said Harry; this was perfectly true, although his conscience squirmed slightly all the same. "Thanks to Snape . . ."

"You still got detention with Snape this Saturday?" Ron continued.

"Yeah, and the Saturday after that, and the Saturday after that,"

sighed Harry. "And he's hinting now that if I don't get all the boxes done by the end of term, we'll carry on next year."

He was finding these detentions particularly irksome because they cut into the already limited time he could have been spending with Ginny. Indeed, he had frequently wondered lately whether Snape did not know this, for he was keeping Harry later and later every time, while making pointed asides about Harry having to miss the good weather and the varied opportunities it offered.

Harry was shaken from these bitter reflections by the appearance at his side of Jimmy Peakes, who was holding out a scroll of parchment.

"Thanks, Jimmy . . . Hey, it's from Dumbledore!" said Harry excitedly, unrolling the parchment and scanning it. "He wants me to go to his office as quick as I can!"

They stared at each other.

"Blimey," whispered Ron. "You don't reckon . . . he hasn't found . . . ?"

"Better go and see, hadn't I?" said Harry, jumping to his feet.

He hurried out of the common room and along the seventh floor as fast as he could, passing nobody but Peeves, who swooped past in the opposite direction, throwing bits of chalk at Harry in a routine sort of way and cackling loudly as he dodged Harry's defensive jinx. Once Peeves had vanished, there was silence in the corridors; with only fifteen minutes left until curfew, most people had already returned to their common rooms.

And then Harry heard a scream and a crash. He stopped in his tracks, listening.

“How — *dare* — you — aaaaargh!”

The noise was coming from a corridor nearby; Harry sprinted toward it, his wand at the ready, hurtled around another corner, and saw Professor Trelawney sprawled upon the floor, her head covered in one of her many shawls, several sherry bottles lying beside her, one broken.

“Professor —”

Harry hurried forward and helped Professor Trelawney to her feet. Some of her glittering beads had become entangled with her glasses. She hiccuped loudly, patted her hair, and pulled herself up on Harry’s helping arm.

“What happened, Professor?”

“You may well ask!” she said shrilly. “I was strolling along, brooding upon certain dark portents I happen to have glimpsed . . .”

But Harry was not paying much attention. He had just noticed where they were standing: There on the right was the tapestry of dancing trolls, and on the left, that smoothly impenetrable stretch of stone wall that concealed —

“Professor, were you trying to get into the Room of Requirement?”

“. . . omens I have been vouchsafed — what?” She looked suddenly shifty.

“The Room of Requirement,” repeated Harry. “Were you trying to get in there?”

“I — well — I didn’t know students knew about —”

“Not all of them do,” said Harry. “But what happened? You screamed. . . . It sounded as though you were hurt. . . .”

“I — well,” said Professor Trelawney, drawing her shawls around

her defensively and staring down at him with her vastly magnified eyes. “I wished to — ah — deposit certain — um — personal items in the room. . . .” And she muttered something about “nasty accusations.”

“Right,” said Harry, glancing down at the sherry bottles. “But you couldn’t get in and hide them?”

He found this very odd; the room had opened for him, after all, when he had wanted to hide the Half-Blood Prince’s book.

“Oh, I got in all right,” said Professor Trelawney, glaring at the wall. “But there was somebody already in there.”

“Somebody in — ? Who?” demanded Harry. “Who was in there?”

“I have no idea,” said Professor Trelawney, looking slightly taken aback at the urgency in Harry’s voice. “I walked into the room and I heard a voice, which has never happened before in all my years of hiding — of using the room, I mean.”

“A voice? Saying what?”

“I don’t know that it was saying anything,” said Professor Trelawney. “It was . . . whooping.”

“Whooping?”

“Gleefully,” she said, nodding.

Harry stared at her.

“Was it male or female?”

“I would hazard a guess at male,” said Professor Trelawney.

“And it sounded happy?”

“Very happy,” said Professor Trelawney sniffily.

“As though it was celebrating?”

“Most definitely.”

“And then — ?”

“And then I called out ‘Who’s there?’”

“You couldn’t have found out who it was without asking?” Harry asked her, slightly frustrated.

“The Inner Eye,” said Professor Trelawney with dignity, straightening her shawls and many strands of glittering beads, “was fixed upon matters well outside the mundane realms of whooping voices.”

“Right,” said Harry hastily; he had heard about Professor Trelawney’s Inner Eye all too often before. “And did the voice say who was there?”

“No, it did not,” she said. “Everything went pitch-black and the next thing I knew, I was being hurled headfirst out of the room!”

“And you didn’t see that coming?” said Harry, unable to help himself.

“No, I did not, as I say, it was pitch —” She stopped and glared at him suspiciously.

“I think you’d better tell Professor Dumbledore,” said Harry. “He ought to know Malfoy’s celebrating — I mean, that someone threw you out of the room.”

To his surprise, Professor Trelawney drew herself up at this suggestion, looking haughty.

“The headmaster has intimated that he would prefer fewer visits from me,” she said coldly. “I am not one to press my company upon those who do not value it. If Dumbledore chooses to ignore the warnings the cards show —” Her bony hand closed suddenly around

Harry's wrist. "Again and again, no matter how I lay them out —" And she pulled a card dramatically from underneath her shawls. "— the lightning-struck tower," she whispered. "Calamity. Disaster. Coming nearer all the time . . ."

"Right," said Harry again. "Well . . . I still think you should tell Dumbledore about this voice, and everything going dark and being thrown out of the room . . ."

"You think so?" Professor Trelawney seemed to consider the matter for a moment, but Harry could tell that she liked the idea of retelling her little adventure.

"I'm going to see him right now," said Harry. "I've got a meeting with him. We could go together."

"Oh, well, in that case," said Professor Trelawney with a smile. She bent down, scooped up her sherry bottles, and dumped them unceremoniously in a large blue-and-white vase standing in a nearby niche.

"I miss having you in my classes, Harry," she said soulfully as they set off together. "You were never much of a Seer . . . but you were a wonderful Object . . ."

Harry did not reply; he had loathed being the Object of Professor Trelawney's continual predictions of doom.

"I am afraid," she went on, "that the nag — I'm sorry, the centaur — knows nothing of cartomancy. I asked him — one Seer to another — had he not, too, sensed the distant vibrations of coming catastrophe? But he seemed to find me almost comical. Yes, comical!"

Her voice rose rather hysterically, and Harry caught a powerful

whiff of sherry even though the bottles had been left behind.

“Perhaps the horse has heard people say that I have not inherited my great-great-grandmother’s gift. Those rumors have been bandied about by the jealous for years. You know what I say to such people, Harry? Would Dumbledore have let me teach at this great school, put so much trust in me all these years, had I not proved myself to him?”

Harry mumbled something indistinct.

“I well remember my first interview with Dumbledore,” went on Professor Trelawney, in throaty tones. “He was deeply impressed, of course, deeply impressed. . . . I was staying at the Hog’s Head, which I do not advise, incidentally — bedbugs, dear boy — but funds were low. Dumbledore did me the courtesy of calling upon me in my room. He questioned me. . . . I must confess that, at first, I thought he seemed ill-disposed toward Divination . . . and I remember I was starting to feel a little odd, I had not eaten much that day . . . but then . . .”

And now Harry was paying attention properly for the first time, for he knew what had happened then: Professor Trelawney had made the prophecy that had altered the course of his whole life, the prophecy about him and Voldemort.

“. . . but then we were rudely interrupted by Severus Snape!”

“What?”

“Yes, there was a commotion outside the door and it flew open, and there was that rather uncouth barman standing with Snape, who was waffling about having come the wrong way up the stairs, although I’m afraid that I myself rather thought he had been apprehended eavesdropping on my interview with Dumbledore —

you see, he himself was seeking a job at the time, and no doubt hoped to pick up tips! Well, after that, you know, Dumbledore seemed much more disposed to give me a job, and I could not help thinking, Harry, that it was because he appreciated the stark contrast between my own unassuming manners and quiet talent, compared to the pushing, thrusting young man who was prepared to listen at keyholes — Harry, dear?”

She looked back over her shoulder, having only just realized that Harry was no longer with her; he had stopped walking and they were now ten feet from each other.

“Harry?” she repeated uncertainly.

Perhaps his face was white to make her look so concerned and frightened. Harry was standing stock-still as waves of shock crashed over him, wave after wave, obliterating everything except the information that had been kept from him for so long. . . .

It was Snape who had overheard the prophecy. It was Snape who had carried the news of the prophecy to Voldemort. Snape and Peter Pettigrew together had sent Voldemort hunting after Lily and James and their son. . . .

Nothing else mattered to Harry just now.

“Harry?” said Professor Trelawney again. “Harry — I thought we were going to see the headmaster together?”

“You stay here,” said Harry through numb lips.

“But dear . . . I was going to tell him how I was assaulted in the Room of —”

“You stay here!” Harry repeated angrily.

She looked alarmed as he ran past her, around the corner into

Dumbledore's corridor, where the lone gargoyle stood sentry. Harry shouted the password at the gargoyle and ran up the moving spiral staircase three steps at a time. He did not knock upon Dumbledore's door, he hammered; and the calm voice answered, "Enter" after Harry had already flung himself into the room.

Fawkes the phoenix looked around, his bright black eyes gleaming with reflected gold from the sunset beyond the windows. Dumbledore was standing at the window looking out at the grounds, a long, black traveling cloak in his arms.

"Well, Harry, I promised that you could come with me."

For a moment or two, Harry did not understand; the conversation with Trelawney had driven everything else out of his head and his brain seemed to be moving very slowly.

"Come . . . with you . . . ?"

"Only if you wish it, of course."

"If I . . ."

And then Harry remembered why he had been eager to come to Dumbledore's office in the first place. "You've found one? You've found a Horcrux?"

"I believe so."

Rage and resentment fought shock and excitement: For several moments, Harry could not speak.

"It is natural to be afraid," said Dumbledore.

"I'm not scared!" said Harry at once, and it was perfectly true; fear was one emotion he was not feeling at all. "Which Horcrux is it? Where is it?"

"I am not sure which it is — though I think we can rule out the

snake — but I believe it to be hidden in a cave on the coast many miles from here, a cave I have been trying to locate for a very long time: the cave in which Tom Riddle once terrorized two children from his orphanage on their annual trip; you remember?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “How is it protected?”

“I do not know; I have suspicions that may be entirely wrong.” Dumbledore hesitated, then said, “Harry, I promised you that you could come with me, and I stand by that promise, but it would be very wrong of me not to warn you that this will be exceedingly dangerous.”

“I’m coming,” said Harry, almost before Dumbledore had finished speaking. Boiling with anger at Snape, his desire to do something desperate and risky had increased tenfold in the last few minutes. This seemed to show on Harry’s face, for Dumbledore moved away from the window and looked more closely at Harry, a slight crease between his silver eyebrows.

“What has happened to you?”

“Nothing,” lied Harry promptly.

“What has upset you?”

“I’m not upset.”

“Harry, you were never a good Occlumens —”

The word was the spark that ignited Harry’s fury.

“Snape!” he said, very loudly, and Fawkes gave a soft squawk behind them. “Snape’s what’s happened! He told Voldemort about the prophecy, it was *him*, he listened outside the door, Trelawney told me!”

Dumbledore’s expression did not change, but Harry thought his

face whitened under the bloody tinge cast by the setting sun. For a long moment, Dumbledore said nothing. "When did you find out about this?" he asked at last.

"Just now!" said Harry, who was refraining from yelling with enormous difficulty. And then, suddenly, he could not stop himself. "AND YOU LET HIM TEACH HERE AND HE TOLD VOLDEMORT TO GO AFTER MY MUM AND DAD!"

Breathing hard as though he was fighting, Harry turned away from Dumbledore, who still had not moved a muscle, and paced up and down the study, rubbing his knuckles in his hand and exercising every last bit of restraint to prevent himself knocking things over. He wanted to rage and storm at Dumbledore, but he also wanted to go with him to try and destroy the Horcrux; he wanted to tell him that he was a foolish old man for trusting Snape, but he was terrified that Dumbledore would not take him along unless he mastered his anger. . . .

"Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "Please listen to me."

It was as difficult to stop his relentless pacing as to refrain from shouting. Harry paused, biting his lip, and looked into Dumbledore's lined face.

"Professor Snape made a terrible —"

"Don't tell me it was a mistake, sir, he was listening at the door!"

"Please let me finish." Dumbledore waited until Harry had nodded curtly, then went on. "Professor Snape made a terrible mistake. He was still in Lord Voldemort's employ on the night he heard the first half of Professor Trelawney's prophecy. Naturally, he hastened to tell his master what he had heard, for it concerned his master most

deeply. But he did not know — he had no possible way of knowing — which boy Voldemort would hunt from then onward, or that the parents he would destroy in his murderous quest were people that Professor Snape knew, that they were your mother and father —”

Harry let out a yell of mirthless laughter.

“He hated my dad like he hated Sirius! Haven’t you noticed, Professor, how the people Snape hates tend to end up dead?”

“You have no idea of the remorse Professor Snape felt when he realized how Lord Voldemort had interpreted the prophecy, Harry. I believe it to be the greatest regret of his life and the reason that he returned —”

“But *he’s* a very good Occlumens, isn’t he, sir?” said Harry, whose voice was shaking with the effort of keeping it steady. “And isn’t Voldemort convinced that Snape’s on his side, even now? Professor . . . how can you be *sure* Snape’s on our side?”

Dumbledore did not speak for a moment; he looked as though he was trying to make up his mind about something. At last he said, “I am sure. I trust Severus Snape completely.”

Harry breathed deeply for a few moments in an effort to steady himself. It did not work.

“Well, I don’t!” he said, as loudly as before. “He’s up to something with Draco Malfoy right now, right under your nose, and you still —”

“We have discussed this, Harry,” said Dumbledore, and now he sounded stern again. “I have told you my views.”

“You’re leaving the school tonight, and I’ll bet you haven’t even considered that Snape and Malfoy might decide to —”

“To what?” asked Dumbledore, his eyebrows raised. “What is it

that you suspect them of doing, precisely?”

“I . . . they’re up to something!” said Harry, and his hands curled into fists as he said it. “Professor Trelawney was just in the Room of Requirement, trying to hide her sherry bottles, and she heard Malfoy whooping, celebrating! He’s trying to mend something dangerous in there and if you ask me, he’s fixed it at last and you’re about to just walk out of school without —”

“Enough,” said Dumbledore. He said it quite calmly, and yet Harry fell silent at once; he knew that he had finally crossed some invisible line. “Do you think that I have once left the school unprotected during my absences this year? I have not. Tonight, when I leave, there will again be additional protection in place. Please do not suggest that I do not take the safety of my students seriously, Harry.”

“I didn’t —” mumbled Harry, a little abashed, but Dumbledore cut across him.

“I do not wish to discuss the matter any further.”

Harry bit back his retort, scared that he had gone too far, that he had ruined his chance of accompanying Dumbledore, but Dumbledore went on, “Do you wish to come with me tonight?”

“Yes,” said Harry at once.

“Very well, then. Listen.” Dumbledore drew himself up to his full height. “I take you with me on one condition: that you obey any command I might give you at once, and without question.”

“Of course.”

“Be sure to understand me, Harry. I mean that you must follow even such orders as ‘run,’ ‘hide,’ or ‘go back.’ Do I have your word?”

“I — yes, of course.”

“If I tell you to hide, you will do so?”

“Yes.”

“If I tell you to flee, you will obey?”

“Yes.”

“If I tell you to leave me and save yourself, you will do as I tell you?”

“I —”

“Harry?”

They looked at each other for a moment.

“Yes, sir.”

“Very good. Then I wish you to go and fetch your Invisibility Cloak and meet me in the entrance hall in five minutes’ time.”

Dumbledore turned back to look out of the fiery window; the sun was now a ruby red glare along the horizon. Harry walked quickly from the office and down the spiral staircase. His mind was oddly clear all of a sudden. He knew what to do.

Ron and Hermione were sitting together in the common room when he came back. “What does he want?” Hermione said at once. “Harry, are you okay?” she added anxiously.

“I’m fine,” said Harry shortly, racing past them. He dashed up the stairs and into his dormitory, where he flung open his trunk and pulled out the Marauder’s Map and a pair of balled-up socks. Then he sped back down the stairs and into the common room, skidding to a halt where Ron and Hermione sat, looking stunned.

“I’ve got to be quick,” Harry panted. “Dumbledore thinks I’m

getting my Invisibility Cloak. Listen. . . .”

Quickly he told them where he was going and why. He did not pause either for Hermione’s gasps of horror or for Ron’s hasty questions; they could work out the finer details for themselves later.

“. . . so you see what this means?” Harry finished at a gallop. “Dumbledore won’t be here tonight, so Malfoy’s going to have another clear shot at whatever he’s up to. *No, listen to me!*” he hissed angrily, as both Ron and Hermione showed every sign of interrupting. “I know it was Malfoy celebrating in the Room of Requirement. Here —” He shoved the Marauder’s Map into Hermione’s hands. “You’ve got to watch him and you’ve got to watch Snape too. Use anyone else who you can rustle up from the D.A., Hermione, those contact Galleons will still work, right? Dumbledore says he’s put extra protection in the school, but if Snape’s involved, he’ll know what Dumbledore’s protection is, and how to avoid it — but he won’t be expecting you lot to be on the watch, will he?”

“Harry —” began Hermione, her eyes huge with fear.

“I haven’t got time to argue,” said Harry curtly. “Take this as well —”

He thrust the socks into Ron’s hands.

“Thanks,” said Ron. “Er — why do I need socks?”

“You need what’s wrapped in them, it’s the Felix Felicis. Share it between yourselves and Ginny too. Say good-bye to her for me. I’d better go, Dumbledore’s waiting —”

“No!” said Hermione, as Ron unwrapped the tiny little bottle of golden potion, looking awestruck. “We don’t want it, you take it, who knows what you’re going to be facing?”

“I’ll be fine, I’ll be with Dumbledore,” said Harry. “I want to know you lot are okay. . . . Don’t look like that, Hermione, I’ll see you later. . . .”

And he was off, hurrying back through the portrait hole and toward the entrance hall.

Dumbledore was waiting beside the oaken front doors. He turned as Harry came skidding out onto the topmost stone step, panting hard, a searing stitch in his side.

“I would like you to wear your Cloak, please,” said Dumbledore, and he waited until Harry had thrown it on before saying, “Very good. Shall we go?”

Dumbledore set off at once down the stone steps, his own traveling cloak barely stirring in the still summer air. Harry hurried alongside him under the Invisibility Cloak, still panting and sweating rather a lot.

“But what will people think when they see you leaving, Professor?” Harry asked, his mind on Malfoy and Snape.

“That I am off into Hogsmeade for a drink,” said Dumbledore lightly. “I sometimes offer Rosmerta my custom, or else visit the Hog’s Head . . . or I appear to. It is as good a way as any of disguising one’s true destination.”

They made their way down the drive in the gathering twilight. The air was full of the smells of warm grass, lake water, and wood smoke from Hagrid’s cabin. It was difficult to believe that they were heading for anything dangerous or frightening.

“Professor,” said Harry quietly, as the gates at the bottom of the drive came into view, “will we be Apparating?”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. “You can Apparate now, I believe?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “but I haven’t got a license.”

He felt it best to be honest; what if he spoiled everything by turning up a hundred miles from where he was supposed to go?

“No matter,” said Dumbledore, “I can assist you again.”

They turned out of the gates into the twilit, deserted lane to Hogsmeade. Darkness descended fast as they walked, and by the time they reached the High Street night was falling in earnest. Lights twinkled from windows over shops and as they neared the Three Broomsticks they heard raucous shouting.

“— and stay out!” shouted Madam Rosmerta, forcibly ejecting a grubby-looking wizard. “Oh, hello, Albus . . . You’re out late . . .”

“Good evening, Rosmerta, good evening . . . forgive me, I’m off to the Hog’s Head. . . . No offense, but I feel like a quieter atmosphere tonight. . . .”

A minute later they turned the corner into the side street where the Hog’s Head’s sign creaked a little, though there was no breeze. In contrast to the Three Broomsticks, the pub appeared to be completely empty.

“It will not be necessary for us to enter,” muttered Dumbledore, glancing around. “As long as nobody sees us go . . . now place your hand upon my arm, Harry. There is no need to grip too hard, I am merely guiding you. On the count of three . . . One . . . two . . . three . . .”

Harry turned. At once, there was that horrible sensation that he was being squeezed through a thick rubber tube; he could not draw breath, every part of him was being compressed almost past

endurance and then, just when he thought he must suffocate, the invisible bands seemed to burst open, and he was standing in cool darkness, breathing in lungfuls of fresh, salty air.

Die Siener Word Afgeluister

Die feit dat Harry Potter met Ginny Weasley uitgaan, is groot nuus vir baie mense, veral die meisies, maar Harry is die volgende paar weke so gelukkig en verlief dat hy hom nie aan skinderstories steur nie. Dit is 'n welkome verandering dat mense oor iets praat wat hom gelukkiger maak as wat hy baie lanklaas was, eerder as oor hom wat by afgryslike Donker towerkuns betrokke was.

“Mens sal dink daar’s beter dinge om oor te skinder,” sê Ginny. Sy sit op die vloer in die geselskamer en leun teen Harry se bene terwyl sy die *Daaglikse Profeet* lees. “Drie Dementor-aanvalle binne een week en al wat Romilda Vane doen, is om my te vra of daar ’n Hippogrief op jou bors getatoeër is.”

Ron en Hermione skree van die lag. Harry ignoreer hulle.

“Wat het jy vir haar gesê?”

“Ek het gesê dis ’n Hongaarse Horingstert,” sê Ginny en blaai ingedagte om na die volgende bladsy in die koerant. “Baie meer macho.”

“Dankie,” sê Harry en grinnik. “En wat het jy vir haar gesê, Ron?”

“’n Pigmee Poffie, maar ek het nie gesê waar nie.”

Ron kyk vererg hoe Hermione rondrol van die lag.

“Oppas,” sê hy en wys ’n waarskuwende vinger vir Harry en Ginny. “Net oor ek my toestemming gegee het, beteken dit nie ek kan dit nie weer terugtrek nie —”

“Jou toestemming” spot Ginny. “Van wanneer af vra ek jou toestemming om enigiets te doen? In elk geval, jy’t self gesê eerder Harry as Michael of Dean.”

“Ja, natuurlik,” sê Ron teësinnig. “Net solank julle nie in die openbaar begin vry nie —”

“Jou vieslike huigelaar! Wat van jou en Lavender wat oral soos twee palings aan mekaar vasgesuig het?” wil Ginny weet.

Maar Ron se verdraagsaamheid word nie veel langer op die proef gestel nie, want dit word Junie en Harry en Ginny kan al hoe minder

tyd by mekaar deurbring. Ginny se Uille kom nader en sy moet tot laat saans hersiening doen. Op een so 'n aand, toe Ginny biblioteek toe is en Harry langs die venster in die geselskamer sit en veronderstel is om sy Kruiékunde-huiswerk klaar te maak, maar in werklikheid droom oor die baie besonderse uurtjie wat hy en Ginny oor middagete onder by die meer deurgebring het, val Hermione met 'n verbete uitdrukking op haar gesig in die stoel tussen hom en Ron neer.

“Ek wil met jou praat, Harry.”

“Waaroor?” vra Harry agterdogtig. Hermione het hom net die vorige dag uitgetrap omdat hy Ginny se aandag aflei terwyl sy hard vir haar eksamen behoort te leer.

“Die sogenaamde Halfbloed Prins.”

“Ag nee, nie weer nie,” kreun hy. “Hou asseblief op daarmee.”

Hy het dit nog nie weer gewaag om terug na die Vertrek van Vereistes toe te gaan om sy boek te gaan haal nie, en sy prestasies in Towerdrankies ly gevolglik daaronder (hoewel Slughorn, wat van Ginny hou, dit skertsend aan Harry se smoorverliefdheid toeskryf). Maar Harry is seker Snape het nog nie moed opgegee om die Prins se boek in die hande te kry nie en hy is vasbeslote om dit te los waar dit is terwyl Snape nog so op sy hoede bly.

“Ek gaan nie daarmee ophou,” sê Hermione streng, “voor jy nie enduit na my geluister het nie. Ek het bietjie probeer uitvind wie 'n stokperdjie daarvan maak om Donker towerspreuke uit te dink –”

“Hy't nie 'n stokperdjie daarvan gemaak nie –”

“Hy, hy – wie sê dis 'n hy?”

“Ons is al hierdeur,” sê Harry kwaad. “Prins, Hermione, Prins!”

“Reg!” sê Hermione en daar is helderrooi kolle op haar wange. Sy haal 'n baie ou stukkie koerantpapier uit haar sak en plak dit op die tafel voor Harry neer. “Kyk daarna! Kyk na die foto!”

Harry tel die gekreukelde stukkie papier op en staar na die bewegende foto wat al geel van ouderdom is; Ron leun oor om dit ook te sien. Dit is 'n foto van 'n brandmaer meisie van omtrent vyftien. Sy is nie mooi nie; sy lyk kwaad en nors tegelyk en het swaar wenkbroue en 'n lang, bleek gesig. Onderaan die foto staan daar: *Eileen Prince, Kaptein van Hogwarts se Gobstonespan.*

“So?” sê Harry en lees vinnig die kort nuusberig by die foto; dit is 'n taamlik vervelige storie oor interskoolkompetisies.

“Haar naam was Eileen Prince. Prince, Harry.”

Hulle kyk na mekaar en Harry besef wat Hermione probeer sê. Hy bars uit van die lag.

“Nooit gesien nie.”

“Wat?”

“Dink jy sy was die Halfbloed ...? Ag, komaan.”

“Wel, hoekom nie? Harry, daar is nie enige regte prinse in die towenaarswêreld nie! Dis óf ’n bynaam, ’n opgemaakte titel wat iemand vir haar- of homself gegee het, óf dit kan na die persoon se van verwys. Hei, luister! Sê nou maar haar pa was ’n towenaar met die van ‘Prince’ en haar ma was ’n Moggel, dan maak dit haar mos ’n ‘halfbloed Prince’?”

“Ja, baie slim, Hermione ...”

“Maar dit is *moontlik*! Miskien was sy trots daarop dat sy ’n halfbloed Prince is!”

“Luister, Hermione ek weet dit was nie ’n meisie nie. Ek weet dit net.”

“Die waarheid is, jy dink nie ’n meisie kon slim genoeg gewees het nie,” sê Hermione ergerlik.

“Hoe kan ek nou al vyf jaar lank saam met jou rondhang en nie dink meisies is slim nie?” vra Harry seergemaak. “Dis die manier waarop hy skryf. Ek weet net die Prins was ’n ou; ek weet dit eenvoudig net. Hierdie meisie het niks daarmee te doen nie. Waar kry jy dit in elk geval?”

“In die biblioteek,” sê Hermione voorspelbaar. “Daar is ’n hele versameling ou *Profete*. Wel, ek gaan kyk of ek meer oor Eileen Prince kan uitvind.”

“Geniet dit,” se Harry geïrriteerd.

“Ek sal,” sê Hermione. “En die eerste plek waar ek gaan kyk,” sê sy vermakerig wanneer sy by die portretopening kom, “is tussen die rekords van ou Towerdrankietoekennings!”

Harry kyk haar vir ’n oomblik suur agterna en staar dan weer die skemerte in.

“Sy kan nou nog nie daaroor kom dat jy beter as sy in Towerdrankies was nie,” sê Ron en keer dan weer terug na sy eksemplaar van *Eenduisend Magiese Kruie en Swamme*.

“Jy dink nie ek is mal om daai boek te wil terughê nie?”

“’Tuurlik nie,” sê Ron met oortuiging. “Hy was ’n genie, daai Prins. En buitendien ... sonder sy wenk van die besoarsteen ...” gaan hy aan en trek sy vinger betekenisvol oor sy keel, “sou ek nie hier gewees het om dit te bespreek nie, of hoe? Ek bedoel, ek sê nie die towerspreuk wat jy op Malfoy gebruik het, was wonderlik nie –”

“Ek ook nie,” sê Harry vinnig.

“Maar hy’t oukei reggekom, het hy nie? Hy was sommer tjop-tjop weer op en aan die gang.”

“Ja,” sê Harry, en dit is heeltemal waar, al pla sy gewete hom nogtans daaroor. “Danksy Snape ...”

“Het jy nog steeds hierdie Saterdag detensie by hom?” vra Ron.

“Ja, en die Saterdag daarna, en die Saterdag daarna,” sug Harry. “En hy skimp nou dat as ek nie teen die einde van die kwartaal al die bokse klaarkry nie, ons volgende jaar daarmee sal aangaan.”

Hierdie detensies is vir Harry ’n ekstra doring in die vlees omdat dit die reeds beperkte tyd wat hy saam met Ginny kan deurbring selfs nog minder maak. Hy wonder deesdae of Snape dit nie weet nie, want hy hou Harry elke keer langer en langer daar terwyl hy snedig terloopse aanmerkings maak oor hoe Harry die lekker weer en die verskeidenheid geleenthede wat dit bied, misloop.

Harry word uit hierdie bitter gedagtes weggeruk toe Jimmy Peakes met ’n perkamentrol langs hom kom staan.

“Dankie, Jimmy ... Hei, dis van Dumbledore!” sê Harry opgewonde en rol die perkament oop en lees dit. “Hy wil hê ek moet so vinnig moontlik na sy kantoor toe kom!”

Hulle staar na mekaar.

“Dêmmitt,” fluister Ron. “Dink jy ... hy’t dalk iets gekry ...?”

“Ek beter gaan uitvind!” sê Harry en spring op.

Hy gaan haastig by die geselskamer uit en loop so vinnig as wat hy kan met die sewende verdieping langs. Harry kom niemand teë nie, behalwe Peeves wat in die teenoorgestelde rigting verbyswiep en hom oudergewoonte met stukkies bordkryt bestook terwyl hy hard kekkel en vir Harry se verdedigende paljas koes. Toe Peeves eers weg is, is die gange stil; dit is net vyftien minute voor die aandklok gaan lui; die meeste mense is al in hulle geselskamers.

Skielik hoor Harry ’n gil en ’n slag. Hy steek in sy spore vas en luister.

“Hoe – *durf* – jy – auuuuuuuu!”

Die geluide kom uit ’n nabygeleë gang; Harry hardloop soontoe, sy towerstaf gereed. Hy storm om die hoek en sien professor Trelawney uitgestrek op die vloer lê: Haar kop is iewers in een van haar baie tjalies verstrengel en daar lê ’n hele paar sjerriebottels, waarvan een gebreek het, langs haar.

“Professor –”

Harry kom vinnig nader en help professor Trelawney om regop te kom. Party van haar blink krale het aan haar bril vasgehaak. Sy hik hard, pof haar hare reg en trek haar aan Harry se helpende arm op.

“Wat het gebeur, professor?”

“Jy vra nog!” sê sy skril. “Ek het geloop en tob oor sekere Donker voorbodes waarop ek ’n vlugtige blik gekry het ...”

Maar Harry se aandag is nie eintlik by haar nie. Hy het so pas agtergekom waar hulle staan: Regs van hulle is die tapisserie van die

dansende trolle en links is daardie gladde, ondeurdringbare stuk klipmuur waaragter –

“Professor, het u by die Vertrek van Vereistes probeer inkom?”

“... waarskuwings wat aan my openbaar is – wat?”

Sy vermy skielik sy oë.

“Die Vertrek van Vereistes,” herhaal Harry. “Het u daar probeer inkom?”

“Ek – wel – ek het nie geweet studente weet van –”

“Nie almal van hulle weet nie,” sê Harry. “Maar wat het gebeur? U het gegil ... Dit het geklink of u seergekry het ...”

“Ek – wel,” sê professor Trelawney en vou haar beskermend in haar tjalies toe. Sy staar na hom met haar geweldig vergrote oë. “Ek wou – e – iets ter bewaring los – e – persoonlike artikels, hier in die Vertrek ...” En sy mompel iets van “gemene aantygings”.

“Reg,” sê Harry en loer af na die sjerriebottels. “Maar u kon nie inkom om dit te gaan wegsteek nie?”

Dit is vir hom baie vreemd; die Vertrek het dan vir hom oopgegaan toe hy die Halfbloed Prins se boek wou wegsteek?

“O, ek het maklik ingekom,” sê professor Trelawney en gluur na die muur. “Maar daar was alreeds iemand daar binne.”

“Iemand daar – ? Wie?” wil Harry dadelik weet. “Wie was daar binne?”

“Ek het geen idee nie,” sê professor Trelawney en lyk effens dronkgeslaan oor die dringendheid in Harry se stem. “Ek het by die Vertrek ingestap en ’n stem gehoor, wat nog nooit gebeur het in al my jare van goed hier kom wegsteek – ek bedoel, vandat ek die Vertrek besoek nie.”

“’n Stem? Wat wat gesê het?”

“Ek twyfel of dit enigiets spesifieks gesê het,” sê professor Trelawney. “Dit het ... gejuig.”

“Gejuig?”

“Vrolik,” sê sy en knik.

Harry staar haar aan.

“Was dit ’n man of ’n vrou se stem?”

“Ek sou raai dit was ’n man s’n,” sê professor Trelawney.

“En dit het gelukkig geklink?”

“Baie gelukkig,” sê professor Trelawney neusoptrekkerig.

“Asof dit iets vier?”

“Beslis.”

“En toe – ?”

“En toe roep ek: ‘Wie’s daar?’”

“Kon u nie uitvind wie dit was sonder om te vra nie?” vra Harry effens gefrustreerd.

“Die Innerlike Oog,” sê professor Trelawney waardig en trek haar tjalies en baie stringe blink krale reg, “was gefokus op sake ver verheue bo die banale gejuig van stemme.”

“Reg,” sê Harry haastig; hy het al meer as genoeg van professor Trelawney se Innerlike Oog gehoor. “En het die stem gesê wie daar was?”

“Nee, dit het nie,” sê sy. “Alles het pikdonker geword en toe ek weer sien, word ek kop eerste by die Vertrek uitgegooi!”

Harry kan nie help om te vra: “En u het dit nie sien kom nie?”

“Nee, ek het nie. Soos ek sê, dit was pik–” Sy sluk haar woorde en gluur hom agterdogtig aan.

“Ek dink u moet vir professor Dumbledore hiervan vertel,” sê Harry. “Hy behoort te weet Malfoy vier fees oor iets – ek bedoel, dat iemand u by die Vertrek uitgegooi het.”

Tot sy verbasing maak professor Trelawney haar rug styf oor hierdie voorstel en kyk hom uit die hoogte aan.

“Die Skoolhoof het te kenne gegee dat hy dit sal verkies as ek hom minder besoek,” sê sy ysig. “Ek is nie iemand wat my geselskap opdwing aan mense wat geen waardering daarvoor het nie. As Dumbledore verkies om die kaarte se waarskuwings te ignoreer –”

Haar benerige hand gryp Harry se gewrig skielik vas.

“Keer op keer, maak nie saak hoe ek hulle uitpak nie –”

Sy bring ’n kaart dramaties van onder haar tjalies te voorskyn.

“– die toring getref deur weerlig,” fluister sy. “Onheil. Rampspoed. Dit kom al nader en nader ...”

“Reg,” sê Harry weer. “Wel ... ek voel nog steeds u moet vir Dumbledore vertel van daardie stem en van hoe alles donker geword het en u uit die Vertrek gegooi is ...”

“Dink jy so?” Professor Trelawney dink vir ’n oomblik hieroor na, maar Harry weet sy sal nie die kans om iemand van haar avontuurtjie te vertel, laat verbygaan nie.

“Ek gaan hom nou sien,” sê Harry. “Ek het ’n afspraak met hom. Ons kan saam gaan.”

“O wel, in daai geval,” sê professor Trelawney met ’n glimlag. Sy buk af, raap haar sjerriebottels op en gooi dit sonder omhaal in ’n groot blou-en-wit vaas wat daar naby in ’n nis staan.

“Ek mis jou in my klasse, Harry,” sê sy sielvol toe hulle wegstap. “Jy was nie veel van ’n Siener nie ... maar jy was ’n wonderlike Voorwerp ...”

Harry antwoord nie; hy het dit gehaat om die Voorwerp van professor Trelawney se onophoudelike doemprofesieë te wees.

“Ek is bevrees,” gaan sy aan, “daardie ou perd – ekskuus, die sentour – weet niks van kaartuitlêery af nie. Ek het hom gevra – as een Siener tot ’n ander – of hy nie ook die verre vibrasies van ’n komende katastrofe aanvoel nie. Maar dit het gelyk of hy dink ek maak ’n grap. Verbeel jou, ’n grap!”

Haar stem raak al hoe hoër en histerieser en Harry kry ’n sterk reuk van sjerrie, al het sy nie meer die bottels by haar nie.

“Miskien het die perd mense hoor sê dat ek nie my oor-oor-grootmoeder se gawe geërf het nie. Daardie gerug word al jare lank deur afgunstige mense versprei. Weet jy wat sê ek vir diesulkes, Harry? Sou Dumbledore my by hierdie wonderlike instelling laat skoolhou het, sou hy deur soveel jare soveel vertrouwe in my gehad het as ek myself nie aan hom bewys het nie?”

Harry mompel iets onduideliks.

“Ek onthou my eerste onderhoud met Dumbledore nog baie goed,” gaan professor Trelawney skor voort. “Hy was natuurlik diep beïndruk, diep beïndruk ... Ek het by die Swynenes tuisgegaan, wat ek terloops nie sal aanbeveel nie – weeluse, my liewe kind – maar my fondse was beperk. Dumbledore het my die eer aangedoen om my in my kamer by die herberg te kom besoek. Hy het my uitgevra ... Ek moet erken, ek het aanvanklik gedink hy is Voorspellings nie goedgesind nie ... en ek onthou ek het effens vreemd begin voel, want ek het daardie dag nog nie veel geëet nie ... maar toe ...”

Nou is Harry se volle aandag vir die eerste keer by haar, want hy weet wat toe gebeur het: Professor Trelawney het die profesie gemaak wat sy hele lewe se koers verander het, die profesie oor hom en Voldemort.

“... maar toe is ons wreed deur Severus Snape onderbreek!”

“Wat?”

“Ja, daar was ’n lawaai by die deur en toe vlieg dit oop, en daar staan daardie ietwat onbeskofte kroegman langs Snape, wat twak praat dat hy by die verkeerde trap opgekom het, maar ek’s bevrees ek het sommer geweet hy is betrap terwyl hy my en Dumbledore se onderhoud afgeluister het – sien jy, hy was destyds ook op soek na werk en het natuurlik gehoop hy kan ’n paar wenke optel! Wel, daarna het Dumbledore baie meer gewillig gelyk om vir my werk te gee en ek kon nie help om te dink dit was omdat hy die skrilte kontras kon waardeer tussen my beskeie maniere en stille talent en die opdringerige jong man wat bereid was om by ’n sleutelgat af te luister – Harry, skat?”

Sy kyk oor haar skouer, want sy kom nou eers agter Harry is nie meer langs haar nie; hy het tot stilstand gekom en hulle staan nou tien voet van mekaar af.

“Harry?” herhaal sy onseker.

Miskien is dit sy spierwit gesig wat haar so bekommerd en bang laat lyk. Harry staan stokstil terwyl skokgolwe oor hom spoel, golf ná golf wat alles uitwis behalwe die inligting wat al so lank van hom weerhou word ...

Dit was Snape wat afgeluister het toe die profesie gemaak is. Dit was Snape wat Voldemort van die profesie gaan vertel het. Snape en Peter Pettigrew het Voldemort agter Lily en James en hulle seun aan gestuur ...

Niks anders maak op hierdie oomblik vir Harry saak nie.

“Harry?” sê professor Trelawney weer. “Harry – ek dog ons gaan saam na die Skoolhoof toe?”

“Bly hier,” sê Harry deur stywe lippe.

“Maar, skat ... Ek wou vir hom vertel ek is aangeval in die Vertrek van –”

“Bly hier!” herhaal Harry kwaai.

Sy kyk onthuts hoe hy verby haar hardloop en om die hoek verdwyn na Dumbledore se gang waar die drakekop alleen wag staan. Harry gil die wagwoord vir die drakekop en hardloop drie trappe op ’n slag met die bewegende spiraaltrap op. Hy klop nie aan Dumbledore se deur nie; hy hamer daarteen en die kalm stem antwoord “Binne” toe Harry al klaar by die vertrek ingebars het.

Fawkes die feniks kyk om; sy helder swart oë glinster met die weerkaatsing van die goue sonsondergang buitekant die venster. Dumbledore staan by die venster en kyk uit oor die skoolgrond; daar hang ’n lang swart reismantel oor sy arm.

“Wel, Harry, ek het belowe jy kan saam met my kom.”

Vir ’n oomblik of twee verstaan Harry nie; die gesprek met Trelawney het alle ander gedagtes uit sy kop verdryf en dit voel of sy brein baie stadig werk.

“Saam ... met u kom ...?”

“Natuurlik net as jy wil.”

“As ek ...”

En toe onthou Harry hoekom hy in die eerste plek so gretig was om by Dumbledore se kantoor uit te kom.

“Het u een gekry? Het u ’n Horcrux gekry?”

“Ek dink so.”

Woede en wrewel veg teen skok en opwindings: Vir ’n hele paar oomblikke kan Harry nie praat nie.

“Dis natuurlik om bang te wees,” sê Dumbledore.

“Ek is nie bang nie!” sê Harry onmiddellik en dit is absoluut waar; vrees is die een emosie wat hy nie nou ervaar nie. “Watter Horcrux is dit? Waar is dit?”

“Ek is nie seker watter een dit is nie – hoewel ek dink ons die slang kan uitsluit – maar ek glo dis weggesteek in ’n grot aan die kus baie myle hiervandaan, ’n grot wat ek lankal probeer opspoor. Die grot waarin Tom Riddle eenkeer twee verskrikte kinders van sy weeshuis tydens hul jaarlikse uitstappie geterroriseer het; onthou jy?”

“Ja,” sê Harry. “Hoe word dit beskerm?”

“Ek weet nie. Ek het ’n paar vermoedens wat dalk heeltemal verkeerd bewys mag word.” Dumbledore huiwer en sê dan: “Harry, ek het jou belowe jy kan saam met my kom en ek sal my belofte hou, maar dit sal baie verkeerd van my wees om jou nie te waarsku dat dit uiters gevaarlik kan wees nie.”

“Ek kom saam,” sê Harry amper voor Dumbledore nog klaar gepraat het. Hy kook nog steeds van woede vir Snape en dit maak sy drang om iets desperaats en waaghalsigs te doen net tien keer groter. Dit wys blykbaar op Harry se gesig, want Dumbledore beweeg weg van die venster af en kom bekyk hom van naderby met ’n effense plooi tussen sy silwer wenkbroue.

“Wat het met jou gebeur?”

“Niks,” lieg Harry dadelik.

“Wat het jou ontstel?”

“Ek is nie ontsteld nie.”

“Harry, jy was nog nooit goed met Okklumensie nie –”

Die woord is die vonk wat Harry se woede laat ontplof.

“Snape!” sê hy baie hard en Fawkes krysk sag agter hulle. “Snape is wat met my gebeur het! Hy het vir Voldemort van die profesie vertel; dit was hy, hy’t by die deur afgeluister, Trelawney het my vertel!”

Dumbledore se uitdrukking verander nie, maar Harry verbeel hom sy gesig word witter onder die bloederige skynsel wat die ondergaande son daaroor gooi. Vir ’n lang oomblik sê Dumbledore niks nie.

“Wanneer het jy hiervan uitgevind?” vra hy uiteindelik.

“Nou net!” sê Harry en kry dit met groot moeite reg om nie te gil nie. Maar toe, skielik, kan hy homself nie meer keer nie. “EN U LAAT HOM HIER SKOOLHOU, AL HET HY VIR VOLDEMORT AGTER MY MA EN MY PA AAN GESTUUR!”

Harry haal hard asem, asof hy baklei. Hy draai weg van Dumbledore, wat nog steeds nie ’n spier verroer nie, en loop op en af in die studeerkamer terwyl hy een hand se kneukels vryf en elke greintjie selfbeheersing uitoefen om te keer dat hy goed begin rondgooi. Hy wil teen Dumbledore uitvaar, maar hy wil ook saam met hom gaan om die Horcrux te probeer vernietig; hy wil vir hom sê hy was ’n simpel ou man om Snape te vertrou, maar hy is bang

Dumbledore gaan hom nie saamneem as hy nie sy woede kan beteuel nie ...

“Harry,” sê Dumbledore sag. “Luister asseblief na my.”

Dit is net so moeilik om op te hou heen en weer loop as wat dit is om nie te gil en skree nie. Harry gaan staan, byt op sy lip en kyk op in Dumbledore se beplooide gesig.

“Professor Snape het ’n verskriklike –”

“Moenie vir my sê dit was ’n fout nie, professor. Hy het by die deur afgeluister!”

“Laat my asseblief klaarmaak.” Dumbledore wag tot Harry stug knik en gaan dan aan. “Professor Snape het ’n verskriklike fout begaan. Hy was nog in die Heer Voldemort se diens die aand toe hy die eerste helfte van professor Trelawney se profesie gehoor het. Hy het natuurlik dadelik vir sy meester gaan vertel wat hy gehoor het, want dit het sy meester ten diepste geraak. Maar hy het nie geweet – hy kon onmoontlik geweet het – op watter seun Voldemort van toe af jag sou maak, of dat die ouers wat hy in sy moorddadige soektog om die lewe sou bring mense was wat professor Snape geken het, dat hulle jou ma en pa sou wees nie –”

Harry lag hard en vreugdeloos.

“Hy het my pa gehaat soos wat hy Sirius gehaat het! Het professor nog nie agtergekom hoe die mense wat Snape haat op die ou end almal uit die weg geruim word nie?”

“Jy het nie ’n benul hoe berouvol professor Snape was toe hy besef het hoe Voldemort die profesie geïnterpreteer het nie, Harry. Ek glo dit is die ding waaroor hy sover nog die spytste was in sy lewe en die rede hoekom hy teruggekeer het –”

“Maar hy’s baie goed met Okklumensie, nie waar nie?” sê Harry en sy stem bewe van inspanning om dit onder beheer te hou. “En glo Voldemort nie selfs nou nog vas dat Snape aan sy kant is nie? Professor ... hoe kan u *seker* wees Snape is aan ons kant?”

Dumbledore antwoord hom eers nie; dit lyk of hy probeer om oor iets te besluit. Uiteindelik sê hy: “Ek is seker. Ek vertrou Severus Snape ten volle.”

Harry haal ’n paar oomblikke lank diep asem in ’n poging om homself in toom te hou. Dit werk nie.

“Wel, nie ek nie!” sê hy so hard soos voorheen. “Hy voer iets in die mou saam met Draco Malfoy, hier reg onder u neus, en u glo nog steeds –”

“Ons hét dit al bespreek, Harry,” sê Dumbledore en nou klink hy weer streng. “Ek het vir jou gesê wat ek dink.”

“U gaan vanaand hier by die skool weg en ek wed u dink nie eers aan die moontlikheid dat Snape en Malfoy dalk kan besluit om –”

“Om wat te doen?” vra Dumbledore met geligte wenkbroue. “Van wat presies verdink jy hulle?”

“Ek ... Hulle voer iets in die mou!” sê Harry en bal sy vuiste. “Professor Trelawney was nou net in die Vertrek van Vereistes om van haar sjerriebottels weg te steek en toe hoor sy Malfoy vreeslik bly raak oor iets! Hy probeer iets gevaarliks daar binne regmaak en as u my vra, het hy dit uiteindelik reggekry, maar u wil sommer net hier by die skool weggaan sonder om –”

“Genoeg,” sê Dumbledore. Hy sê dit baie bedaard, maar Harry bly nogtans dadelik stil; hy weet hy het nou oor ’n onsigbare skeidslyn getree. “Dink jy ek het die skool ooit een keer onbeskermd agtergelaat terwyl ek vanjaar afwesig was? Ek het nie. Toe ek vanaand vertrek, sal hier bykomende beskerming wees. Moet asseblief nie suggereer dat ek nie my studente se veiligheid ernstig opneem nie, Harry.”

“Ek het nie –” mompel Harry ’n bietjie skaam, maar Dumbledore val hom in die rede.

“Ek wil hierdie aangeleentheid nie verder bespreek nie.”

Harry sluk sy antwoord; hy is bang hy het te ver gegaan, dat hy sy kans om saam met Dumbledore te gaan, bederf het, maar dan sê Dumbledore: “Wil jy vanaand saam met my kom?”

“Ja,” sê Harry dadelik.

“Nou goed dan, luister.”

Dumbledore strek homself tot sy volle lengte uit.

“Ek neem jou op een voorwaarde saam met my: dat jy enige opdrag wat ek jou gee oombliklik en sonder vrae gehoorsaam.”

“Natuurlik.”

“Verstaan my mooi, Harry. Ek bedoel dat jy selfs opdragte soos ‘hardloop’, ‘kruip weg’ of ‘gaan terug’ moet gehoorsaam. Gee jy my jou woord?”

“Ek – ja, natuurlik.”

“As ek vir jou sê om weg te kruip, sal jy dit doen?”

“Ja.”

“As ek vir jou sê om te vlug, sal jy my gehoorsaam?”

“Ja.”

“As ek vir jou sê om my agter te laat en jou eie lewe te red, sal jy doen wat ek vir jou sê?”

“Ek –”

“Harry?”

Hulle kyk mekaar 'n oomblik lank aan.

“Ja, professor.”

“Mooi so. Dan wil ek hê jy moet jou Mantel gaan haal en my oor vyf minute in die Ingangsportaal ontmoet.”

Dumbledore draai om en kyk weer by die vurige venster uit; die son blink nou robynrooi op die horison. Harry loop stil by die kantoor uit en met die spiraaltrap af. Sy brein is skielik vreemd helder. Hy weet wat om te doen.

Ron en Hermione sit saam in die geselskamer toe hy terugkom. “Wat wil Dumbledore hê?” vra Hermione dadelik. “Harry, is jy oukei?” vra sy net daarna bekommerd.

“Ja,” sê Harry kortaf en loop vinnig verby hulle. Hy hardloop met die trap op na sy slaapsaal toe, pluk sy trommel oop en haal sy Mantel, die Plunderaar se Kaart en 'n paar opgerolde sokkies uit. Dan storm hy weer by die trap af tot in die geselskamer en kom gly-gly tot stilstand voor Ron en Hermione, wat hom verstom aankyk.

“Ek het nie baie tyd nie,” hyg Harry. “Dumbledore dink ek het my Onsigbaarheidsmantel kom haal. Luister ...”

Hy vertel vinnig vir hulle waarheen hy gaan en hoekom. Hy reageer nie op Hermione se geskokte snakke en Ron se haastige vrae nie; hulle kan die fyner detail later self uitwerk.

“... so sien julle wat dit beteken?” maak Harry haastig klaar. “Dumbledore sal nie vanaand hier wees nie, so Malfoy gaan weer kans kry om ongehinderd te probeer doen wat hy ook al in die mou voer. *Nee, luister na my!*” blaf hy kwaai wanneer Ron en Hermione albei tekens toon dat hulle hom wil onderbreek. “Ek weet dis Malfoy wat so in die Vertrek van Vereistes gejuig het. Hier –” sê hy en stop die Plunderaar se Kaart in Hermione se hand. “Julle moet hom dop-hou, en julle moet Snape ook dophou. Gebruik enigiemand anders van die DS wat julle kan kry. Hermione, daardie kontak-Galjoene sal nog werk, nê? Dumbledore sê hy sorg vir ekstra beskerming vir die skool, maar as Snape betrokke is, sal hy weet wat Dumbledore se beskerming is en hoe om dit te ontduik – maar hy sal nie verwag dat julle klomp hom dophou nie, sal hy?”

“Harry –” begin Hermione en haar oë is groot van vrees.

“Ek het nie tyd vir stry nie,” sê Harry beslis. “Vat dit ook –” Hy stop die sokkies in Ron se hande.

“Dankie,” sê Ron. “E – hoekom het ek sokkies nodig?”

“Jy het dit wat daarin toegedraai is nodig. Die Felix Felicis. Verdeel dit tussen julle twee en Ginny. Sê vir haar ek sê tot siens. Ek beter hol; Dumbledore wag –”

“Nee!” sê Hermione toe Ron die klein botteltjie met die goue towerdrankie in sprakeloos uithaal. “Ons wil dit nie hê nie; vat jy dit. Wie weet waarteen jy te staan gaan kom?”

“Ek sal oukei wees; ek is by Dumbledore,” sê Harry. “Ek wil weet julle ouens is oukei ... Moenie so vir my kyk nie, Hermione, ek sien julle later ...”

En hy verdwyn deur die portretopening en sit af na die Ingangsportaal toe.

Dumbledore wag al langs die eikehoutvoordeure. Hy draai om toe Harry glyend op die boonste kliptrap tot stilstand kom, uitasem en met 'n steekpyn in die sy.

“Ek wil hê jy moet jou Mantel dra, asseblief,” sê Dumbledore. Hy wag tot Harry dit oor hom gegooi het voor hy sê: “Nou ja, weg is ons.”

Dumbledore begin dadelik by die kliptrap af beweeg en sy reismantel roer skaars in die stil somerlug. Harry loop langs hom onder sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel; hy hyg nog steeds en die sweet tap hom af.

“Maar wat sal mense dink as hulle u sien weggaan, professor?” vra Harry, wat aan Malfoy en Snape dink.

“Dat ek 'n drankie in Hogsmeade gaan drink,” sê Dumbledore lig. “Ek ondersteun Rosmerta soms, of anders besoek ek die Swynenes ... altans dis hoe dit lyk. Dit is so goed soos enige ander manier om 'n mens se ware bestemming te verdoesel.”

Hulle stap met die oprit af, die naderende skemer tegemoet. Die lug is gevul met reuke van warm gras, die meer se water en die rook uit Hagrid se hut. Dit is moeilik om te glo hulle is op pad na iets gevaarliks of angswekkends.

“Professor,” sê Harry sag toe die hekke aan die onderkant van die oprit te voorskyn kom, “gaan ons Appareer?”

“Ja,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek neem aan jy kan nou Appareer?”

“Ja,” sê Harry, “maar ek mag nog nie amptelik nie.”

Hy voel dit is beter om eerlik te wees; sê nou hy bederf alles en beland 'n honderd myl van waar hy veronderstel is om te wees?

“Toemaar,” sê Dumbledore, “ek sal jou weer help.”

Hulle draai by die hekke in die skemer, verlate laning in wat af Hogsmeade toe lei. Dit word nou vinnig donker terwyl hulle aanstap en teen die tyd dat hulle by die hoofstraat kom, is dit byna nag. Ligte flikker in die vensters bo die winkels en toe hulle naby die Drie Besemstokke is, hoor hulle 'n skril stem skree.

“– Bly buite!” gil madame Rosmerta terwyl sy 'n smerige toewenaar met mening uitsmyt. “O hallo, Albus ... jy loop laat rond ...”

“Goeienaand, Rosmerta, goeienaand ... Vergewe my, ek gaan na die Swynenes toe ... Moenie aanstoot neem nie, maar ek het vanaand behoefte aan ’n stiller atmosfeer ...”

’n Minuut later loop hulle om die hoek by ’n systraat in waar die Swynenes se uithangbord effens kraak, al is daar nie ’n briesie nie. In teenstelling met die Drie Besemstokke lyk dit of die kroeg heeltemal leeg is.

“Dit sal nie vir ons nodig wees om in te gaan nie,” fluister Dumbledore en kyk om. “Solank niemand ons sien verdwyn nie ... Sit nou jou hand op my arm, Harry. Jy hoef nie te hard vas te hou nie; ek dien slegs as jou gids. Ek tel tot by drie – een ... twee ... drie ...”

Harry begin tol. Hy ervaar dadelik die aaklige sensasie dat hy deur ’n dik rubberpyp geforseer word; hy kan nie asemhaal nie, elke deeltjie van hom word saamgepers totdat dit amper onhoudbaar is en dan, net toe hy dink hy gaan versmoor, is dit of die onsigbare bande om hom losbreek; hy staan in koel donkerte en asem teue vol vars soutlug in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



THE CAVE

Harry could smell salt and hear rushing waves; a light, chilly breeze ruffled his hair as he looked out at moonlit sea and star-strewn sky. He was standing upon a high outcrop of dark rock, water foaming and churning below him. He glanced over his shoulder. A towering cliff stood behind them, a sheer drop, black and faceless. A few large chunks of rock, such as the one upon which Harry and Dumbledore were standing, looked as though they had broken away from the cliff face at some point in the past. It was a bleak, harsh view, the sea and the rock unrelieved by any tree or sweep of grass or sand.

“What do you think?” asked Dumbledore. He might have been asking Harry’s opinion on whether it was a good site for a picnic.

“They brought the kids from the orphanage here?” asked Harry, who could not imagine a less cozy spot for a day trip.

“Not here, precisely,” said Dumbledore. “There is a village of sorts about halfway along the cliffs behind us. I believe the orphans were taken there for a little sea air and a view of the waves. No, I think it was only ever Tom Riddle and his youthful victims who visited this spot. No Muggle could reach this rock unless they were uncommonly good mountaineers, and boats cannot approach the cliffs, the waters around them are too dangerous. I imagine that Riddle climbed down; magic would have served better than ropes. And he brought two small children with him, probably for the pleasure of terrorizing them. I think the journey alone would have done it, don’t you?”

Harry looked up at the cliff again and felt goose bumps.

“But his final destination — and ours — lies a little farther on. Come.”

Dumbledore beckoned Harry to the very edge of the rock where a series of jagged niches made footholds leading down to boulders that lay half-submerged in water and closer to the cliff. It was a treacherous descent and Dumbledore, hampered slightly by his withered hand, moved slowly. The lower rocks were slippery with seawater. Harry could feel flecks of cold salt spray hitting his face.

“*Lumos,*” said Dumbledore, as he reached the boulder closest to the cliff face. A thousand flecks of golden light sparkled upon the dark surface of the water a few feet below where he crouched; the

black wall of rock beside him was illuminated too.

“You see?” said Dumbledore quietly, holding his wand a little higher. Harry saw a fissure in the cliff into which dark water was swirling.

“You will not object to getting a little wet?”

“No,” said Harry.

“Then take off your Invisibility Cloak — there is no need for it now — and let us take the plunge.”

And with the sudden agility of a much younger man, Dumbledore slid from the boulder, landed in the sea, and began to swim, with a perfect breaststroke, toward the dark slit in the rock face, his lit wand held in his teeth. Harry pulled off his Cloak, stuffed it into his pocket, and followed.

The water was icy; Harry’s waterlogged clothes billowed around him and weighed him down. Taking deep breaths that filled his nostrils with the tang of salt and seaweed, he struck out for the shimmering, shrinking light now moving deeper into the cliff.

The fissure soon opened into a dark tunnel that Harry could tell would be filled with water at high tide. The slimy walls were barely three feet apart and glimmered like wet tar in the passing light of Dumbledore’s wand. A little way in, the passageway curved to the left, and Harry saw that it extended far into the cliff. He continued to swim in Dumbledore’s wake, the tips of his benumbed fingers brushing the rough, wet rock.

Then he saw Dumbledore rising out of the water ahead, his silver hair and dark robes gleaming. When Harry reached the spot he found steps that led into a large cave. He clambered up them, water

streaming from his soaking clothes, and emerged, shivering uncontrollably, into the still and freezing air.

Dumbledore was standing in the middle of the cave, his wand held high as he turned slowly on the spot, examining the walls and ceiling.

“Yes, this is the place,” said Dumbledore.

“How can you tell?” Harry spoke in a whisper.

“It has known magic,” said Dumbledore simply.

Harry could not tell whether the shivers he was experiencing were due to his spine-deep coldness or to the same awareness of enchantments. He watched as Dumbledore continued to revolve on the spot, evidently concentrating on things Harry could not see.

“This is merely the antechamber, the entrance hall,” said Dumbledore after a moment or two. “We need to penetrate the inner place. . . . Now it is Lord Voldemort’s obstacles that stand in our way, rather than those nature made. . . .”

Dumbledore approached the wall of the cave and caressed it with his blackened fingertips, murmuring words in a strange tongue that Harry did not understand. Twice Dumbledore walked right around the cave, touching as much of the rough rock as he could, occasionally pausing, running his fingers backward and forward over a particular spot, until finally he stopped, his hand pressed flat against the wall.

“Here,” he said. “We go on through here. The entrance is concealed.”

Harry did not ask how Dumbledore knew. He had never seen a wizard work things out like this, simply by looking and touching; but Harry had long since learned that bangs and smoke were more often

the marks of ineptitude than expertise.

Dumbledore stepped back from the cave wall and pointed his wand at the rock. For a moment, an arched outline appeared there, blazing white as though there was a powerful light behind the crack.

“You’ve d-done it!” said Harry through chattering teeth, but before the words had left his lips the outline had gone, leaving the rock as bare and solid as ever. Dumbledore looked around.

“Harry, I’m so sorry, I forgot,” he said; he now pointed his wand at Harry and at once, Harry’s clothes were as warm and dry as if they had been hanging in front of a blazing fire.

“Thank you,” said Harry gratefully, but Dumbledore had already turned his attention back to the solid cave wall. He did not try any more magic, but simply stood there staring at it intently, as though something extremely interesting was written on it. Harry stayed quite still; he did not want to break Dumbledore’s concentration. Then, after two solid minutes, Dumbledore said quietly, “Oh, surely not. So crude.”

“What is it, Professor?”

“I rather think,” said Dumbledore, putting his uninjured hand inside his robes and drawing out a short silver knife of the kind Harry used to chop potion ingredients, “that we are required to make payment to pass.”

“Payment?” said Harry. “You’ve got to give the door something?”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. “Blood, if I am not much mistaken.”

“Blood?”

“I said it was crude,” said Dumbledore, who sounded disdainful, even disappointed, as though Voldemort had fallen short of the

standards Dumbledore expected. “The idea, as I am sure you will have gathered, is that your enemy must weaken him- or herself to enter. Once again, Lord Voldemort fails to grasp that there are much more terrible things than physical injury.”

“Yeah, but still, if you can avoid it . . .” said Harry, who had experienced enough pain not to be keen for more.

“Sometimes, however, it is unavoidable,” said Dumbledore, shaking back the sleeve of his robes and exposing the forearm of his injured hand.

“Professor!” protested Harry, hurrying forward as Dumbledore raised his knife. “I’ll do it, I’m —”

He did not know what he was going to say — younger, fitter? But Dumbledore merely smiled. There was a flash of silver, and a spurt of scarlet; the rock face was peppered with dark, glistening drops.

“You are very kind, Harry,” said Dumbledore, now passing the tip of his wand over the deep cut he had made in his own arm, so that it healed instantly, just as Snape had healed Malfoy’s wounds. “But your blood is worth more than mine. Ah, that seems to have done the trick, doesn’t it?”

The blazing silver outline of an arch had appeared in the wall once more, and this time it did not fade away: The blood-spattered rock within it simply vanished, leaving an opening into what seemed total darkness.

“After me, I think,” said Dumbledore, and he walked through the archway with Harry on his heels, lighting his own wand hastily as he went.

An eerie sight met their eyes: They were standing on the edge of a

great black lake, so vast that Harry could not make out the distant banks, in a cavern so high that the ceiling too was out of sight. A misty greenish light shone far away in what looked like the middle of the lake; it was reflected in the completely still water below. The greenish glow and the light from the two wands were the only things that broke the otherwise velvety blackness, though their rays did not penetrate as far as Harry would have expected. The darkness was somehow denser than normal darkness.

“Let us walk,” said Dumbledore quietly. “Be very careful not to step into the water. Stay close to me.”

He set off around the edge of the lake, and Harry followed close behind him. Their footsteps made echoing, slapping sounds on the narrow rim of rock that surrounded the water. On and on they walked, but the view did not vary: on one side of them, the rough cavern wall, on the other, the boundless expanse of smooth, glassy blackness, in the very middle of which was that mysterious greenish glow. Harry found the place and the silence oppressive, unnerving.

“Professor?” he said finally. “Do you think the Horcrux is here?”

“Oh yes,” said Dumbledore. “Yes, I’m sure it is. The question is, how do we get to it?”

“We couldn’t . . . we couldn’t just try a Summoning Charm?” Harry said, sure that it was a stupid suggestion. But he was much keener than he was prepared to admit on getting out of this place as soon as possible.

“Certainly we could,” said Dumbledore, stopping so suddenly that Harry almost walked into him. “Why don’t you do it?”

“Me? Oh . . . okay . . .”

Harry had not expected this, but cleared his throat and said loudly, wand aloft, “*Accio Horcrux!*”

With a noise like an explosion, something very large and pale erupted out of the dark water some twenty feet away; before Harry could see what it was, it had vanished again with a crashing splash that made great, deep ripples on the mirrored surface. Harry leapt backward in shock and hit the wall; his heart was still thundering as he turned to Dumbledore.

“What was that?”

“Something, I think, that is ready to respond should we attempt to seize the Horcrux.”

Harry looked back at the water. The surface of the lake was once more shining black glass: The ripples had vanished unnaturally fast; Harry’s heart, however, was still pounding.

“Did you think that would happen, sir?”

“I thought *something* would happen if we made an obvious attempt to get our hands on the Horcrux. That was a very good idea, Harry; much the simplest way of finding out what we are facing.”

“But we don’t know what the thing was,” said Harry, looking at the sinisterly smooth water.

“What the things *are*, you mean,” said Dumbledore. “I doubt very much that there is only one of them. Shall we walk on?”

“Professor?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“Do you think we’re going to have to go into the lake?”

“Into it? Only if we are very unfortunate.”

“You don’t think the Horcrux is at the bottom?”

“Oh no . . . I think the Horcrux is in the *middle*.”

And Dumbledore pointed toward the misty green light in the center of the lake.

“So we’re going to have to cross the lake to get to it?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Harry did not say anything. His thoughts were all of water monsters, of giant serpents, of demons, kelpies, and sprites. . . .

“Aha,” said Dumbledore, and he stopped again; this time, Harry really did walk into him; for a moment he toppled on the edge of the dark water, and Dumbledore’s uninjured hand closed tightly around his upper arm, pulling him back. “So sorry, Harry, I should have given warning. Stand back against the wall, please; I think I have found the place.”

Harry had no idea what Dumbledore meant; this patch of dark bank was exactly like every other bit as far as he could tell, but Dumbledore seemed to have detected something special about it. This time he was running his hand, not over the rocky wall, but through the thin air, as though expecting to find and grip something invisible.

“Oho,” said Dumbledore happily, seconds later. His hand had closed in midair upon something Harry could not see. Dumbledore moved closer to the water; Harry watched nervously as the tips of Dumbledore’s buckled shoes found the utmost edge of the rock rim. Keeping his hand clenched in midair, Dumbledore raised his wand with the other and tapped his fist with the point.

Immediately a thick coppery green chain appeared out of thin air, extending from the depths of the water into Dumbledore’s clenched

hand. Dumbledore tapped the chain, which began to slide through his fist like a snake, coiling itself on the ground with a clinking sound that echoed noisily off the rocky walls, pulling something from the depths of the black water. Harry gasped as the ghostly prow of a tiny boat broke the surface, glowing as green as the chain, and floated, with barely a ripple, toward the place on the bank where Harry and Dumbledore stood.

“How did you know that was there?” Harry asked in astonishment.

“Magic always leaves traces,” said Dumbledore, as the boat hit the bank with a gentle bump, “sometimes very distinctive traces. I taught Tom Riddle. I know his style.”

“Is . . . is this boat safe?”

“Oh yes, I think so. Voldemort needed to create a means to cross the lake without attracting the wrath of those creatures he had placed within it in case he ever wanted to visit or remove his Horcrux.”

“So the things in the water won’t do anything to us if we cross in Voldemort’s boat?”

“I think we must resign ourselves to the fact that they will, at some point, realize we are not Lord Voldemort. Thus far, however, we have done well. They have allowed us to raise the boat.”

“But why have they let us?” asked Harry, who could not shake off the vision of tentacles rising out of the dark water the moment they were out of sight of the bank.

“Voldemort would have been reasonably confident that none but a very great wizard would have been able to find the boat,” said Dumbledore. “I think he would have been prepared to risk what was, to his mind, the most unlikely possibility that somebody else would

find it, knowing that he had set other obstacles ahead that only he would be able to penetrate. We shall see whether he is right.”

Harry looked down into the boat. It really was very small.

“It doesn’t look like it was built for two people. Will it hold both of us? Will we be too heavy together?”

Dumbledore chuckled.

“Voldemort will not have cared about the weight, but about the amount of magical power that crossed his lake. I rather think an enchantment will have been placed upon this boat so that only one wizard at a time will be able to sail in it.”

“But then — ?”

“I do not think you will count, Harry: You are underage and unqualified. Voldemort would never have expected a sixteen-year-old to reach this place: I think it unlikely that your powers will register compared to mine.”

These words did nothing to raise Harry’s morale; perhaps Dumbledore knew it, for he added, “Voldemort’s mistake, Harry, Voldemort’s mistake . . . Age is foolish and forgetful when it underestimates youth. . . . Now, you first this time, and be careful not to touch the water.”

Dumbledore stood aside and Harry climbed carefully into the boat. Dumbledore stepped in too, coiling the chain onto the floor. They were crammed in together; Harry could not comfortably sit, but crouched, his knees jutting over the edge of the boat, which began to move at once. There was no sound other than the silken rustle of the boat’s prow cleaving the water; it moved without their help, as though an invisible rope was pulling it onward toward the light in the

center. Soon they could no longer see the walls of the cavern; they might have been at sea except that there were no waves.

Harry looked down and saw the reflected gold of his wandlight sparkling and glittering on the black water as they passed. The boat was carving deep ripples upon the glassy surface, grooves in the dark mirror. . . .

And then Harry saw it, marble white, floating inches below the surface.

“Professor!” he said, and his startled voice echoed loudly over the silent water.

“Harry?”

“I think I saw a hand in the water — a human hand!”

“Yes, I am sure you did,” said Dumbledore calmly.

Harry stared down into the water, looking for the vanished hand, and a sick feeling rose in his throat.

“So that thing that jumped out of the water — ?”

But Harry had his answer before Dumbledore could reply; the wandlight had slid over a fresh patch of water and showed him, this time, a dead man lying faceup inches beneath the surface, his open eyes misted as though with cobwebs, his hair and his robes swirling around him like smoke.

“There are bodies in here!” said Harry, and his voice sounded much higher than usual and most unlike his own.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore placidly, “but we do not need to worry about them at the moment.”

“At the moment?” Harry repeated, tearing his gaze from the water to look at Dumbledore.

“Not while they are merely drifting peacefully below us,” said Dumbledore. “There is nothing to be feared from a body, Harry, any more than there is anything to be feared from the darkness. Lord Voldemort, who of course secretly fears both, disagrees. But once again he reveals his own lack of wisdom. It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness, nothing more.”

Harry said nothing; he did not want to argue, but he found the idea that there were bodies floating around them and beneath them horrible and, what was more, he did not believe that they were not dangerous.

“But one of them jumped,” he said, trying to make his voice as level and calm as Dumbledore’s. “When I tried to Summon the Horcrux, a body leapt out of the lake.”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. “I am sure that once we take the Horcrux, we shall find them less peaceable. However, like many creatures that dwell in cold and darkness, they fear light and warmth, which we shall therefore call to our aid should the need arise. Fire, Harry,” Dumbledore added with a smile, in response to Harry’s bewildered expression.

“Oh . . . right . . .” said Harry quickly. He turned his head to look at the greenish glow toward which the boat was still inexorably sailing. He could not pretend now that he was not scared. The great black lake, teeming with the dead . . . It seemed hours and hours ago that he had met Professor Trelawney, that he had given Ron and Hermione Felix Felicis. . . . He suddenly wished he had said a better good-bye to them . . . and he hadn’t seen Ginny at all. . . .

“Nearly there,” said Dumbledore cheerfully.

Sure enough, the greenish light seemed to be growing larger at last, and within minutes, the boat had come to a halt, bumping gently into something that Harry could not see at first, but when he raised his illuminated wand he saw that they had reached a small island of smooth rock in the center of the lake.

“Careful not to touch the water,” said Dumbledore again as Harry climbed out of the boat.

The island was no larger than Dumbledore’s office, an expanse of flat dark stone on which stood nothing but the source of that greenish light, which looked much brighter when viewed close to. Harry squinted at it; at first, he thought it was a lamp of some kind, but then he saw that the light was coming from a stone basin rather like the Pensieve, which was set on top of a pedestal.

Dumbledore approached the basin and Harry followed. Side by side, they looked down into it. The basin was full of an emerald liquid emitting that phosphorescent glow.

“What is it?” asked Harry quietly.

“I am not sure,” said Dumbledore. “Something more worrisome than blood and bodies, however.”

Dumbledore pushed back the sleeve of his robe over his blackened hand, and stretched out the tips of his burned fingers toward the surface of the potion.

“Sir, no, don’t touch — !”

“I cannot touch,” said Dumbledore, smiling faintly. “See? I cannot approach any nearer than this. You try.”

Staring, Harry put his hand into the basin and attempted to touch the potion. He met an invisible barrier that prevented him coming

within an inch of it. No matter how hard he pushed, his fingers encountered nothing but what seemed to be solid and inflexible air.

“Out of the way, please, Harry,” said Dumbledore. He raised his wand and made complicated movements over the surface of the potion, murmuring soundlessly. Nothing happened, except perhaps that the potion glowed a little brighter. Harry remained silent while Dumbledore worked, but after a while Dumbledore withdrew his wand, and Harry felt it was safe to talk again.

“You think the Horcrux is in there, sir?”

“Oh yes.” Dumbledore peered more closely into the basin. Harry saw his face reflected, upside down, in the smooth surface of the green potion. “But how to reach it? This potion cannot be penetrated by hand, Vanished, parted, scooped up, or siphoned away, nor can it be Transfigured, Charmed, or otherwise made to change its nature.”

Almost absentmindedly, Dumbledore raised his wand again, twirled it once in midair, and then caught the crystal goblet that he had conjured out of nowhere.

“I can only conclude that this potion is supposed to be drunk.”

“What?” said Harry. “No!”

“Yes, I think so: Only by drinking it can I empty the basin and see what lies in its depths.”

“But what if — what if it kills you?”

“Oh, I doubt that it would work like that,” said Dumbledore easily. “Lord Voldemort would not want to kill the person who reached this island.”

Harry couldn't believe it. Was this more of Dumbledore's insane determination to see good in everyone?

“Sir,” said Harry, trying to keep his voice reasonable, “sir, this is *Voldemort* we’re —”

“I’m sorry, Harry; I should have said, he would not want to *immediately* kill the person who reached this island,” Dumbledore corrected himself. “He would want to keep them alive long enough to find out how they managed to penetrate so far through his defenses and, most importantly of all, why they were so intent upon emptying the basin. Do not forget that Lord Voldemort believes that he alone knows about his Horcruxes.”

Harry made to speak again, but this time Dumbledore raised his hand for silence, frowning slightly at the emerald liquid, evidently thinking hard.

“Undoubtedly,” he said, finally, “this potion must act in a way that will prevent me taking the Horcrux. It might paralyze me, cause me to forget what I am here for, create so much pain I am distracted, or render me incapable in some other way. This being the case, Harry, it will be your job to make sure I keep drinking, even if you have to tip the potion into my protesting mouth. You understand?”

Their eyes met over the basin, each pale face lit with that strange, green light. Harry did not speak. Was this why he had been invited along — so that he could force-feed Dumbledore a potion that might cause him unendurable pain?

“You remember,” said Dumbledore, “the condition on which I brought you with me?”

Harry hesitated, looking into the blue eyes that had turned green in the reflected light of the basin.

“But what if — ?”

“You swore, did you not, to follow any command I gave you?”

“Yes, but —”

“I warned you, did I not, that there might be danger?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “but —”

“Well, then,” said Dumbledore, shaking back his sleeves once more and raising the empty goblet, “you have my orders.”

“Why can’t I drink the potion instead?” asked Harry desperately.

“Because I am much older, much cleverer, and much less valuable,” said Dumbledore. “Once and for all, Harry, do I have your word that you will do all in your power to make me keep drinking?”

“Couldn’t — ?”

“Do I have it?”

“But —”

“Your word, Harry.”

“I — all right, but —”

Before Harry could make any further protest, Dumbledore lowered the crystal goblet into the potion. For a split second, Harry hoped that he would not be able to touch the potion with the goblet, but the crystal sank into the surface as nothing else had; when the glass was full to the brim, Dumbledore lifted it to his mouth.

“Your good health, Harry.”

And he drained the goblet. Harry watched, terrified, his hands gripping the rim of the basin so hard that his fingertips were numb.

“Professor?” he said anxiously, as Dumbledore lowered the empty glass. “How do you feel?”

Dumbledore shook his head, his eyes closed. Harry wondered

whether he was in pain. Dumbledore plunged the glass blindly back into the basin, refilled it, and drank once more.

In silence, Dumbledore drank three gobletsful of the potion. Then, halfway through the fourth goblet, he staggered and fell forward against the basin. His eyes were still closed, his breathing heavy.

“Professor Dumbledore?” said Harry, his voice strained. “Can you hear me?”

Dumbledore did not answer. His face was twitching as though he was deeply asleep, but dreaming a horrible dream. His grip on the goblet was slackening; the potion was about to spill from it. Harry reached forward and grasped the crystal cup, holding it steady.

“Professor, can you hear me?” he repeated loudly, his voice echoing around the cavern.

Dumbledore panted and then spoke in a voice Harry did not recognize, for he had never heard Dumbledore frightened like this.

“I don’t want . . . Don’t make me . . .”

Harry stared into the whitened face he knew so well, at the crooked nose and half-moon spectacles, and did not know what to do.

“. . . don’t like . . . want to stop . . .” moaned Dumbledore.

“You . . . you can’t stop, Professor,” said Harry. “You’ve got to keep drinking, remember? You told me you had to keep drinking. Here . . .”

Hating himself, repulsed by what he was doing, Harry forced the goblet back toward Dumbledore’s mouth and tipped it, so that Dumbledore drank the remainder of the potion inside.

“No . . .” he groaned, as Harry lowered the goblet back into the

basin and refilled it for him. “I don’t want to. . . . I don’t want to. . . . Let me go. . . .”

“It’s all right, Professor,” said Harry, his hand shaking. “It’s all right, I’m here —”

“Make it stop, make it stop,” moaned Dumbledore.

“Yes . . . yes, this’ll make it stop,” lied Harry. He tipped the contents of the goblet into Dumbledore’s open mouth.

Dumbledore screamed; the noise echoed all around the vast chamber, across the dead black water.

“No, no, no, no, I can’t, I can’t, don’t make me, I don’t want to. . . .”

“It’s all right, Professor, it’s all right!” said Harry loudly, his hands shaking so badly he could hardly scoop up the sixth gobletful of potion; the basin was now half empty. “Nothing’s happening to you, you’re safe, it isn’t real, I swear it isn’t real — take this, now, take this. . . .”

And obediently, Dumbledore drank, as though it was an antidote Harry offered him, but upon draining the goblet, he sank to his knees, shaking uncontrollably.

“It’s all my fault, all my fault,” he sobbed. “Please make it stop, I know I did wrong, oh please make it stop and I’ll never, never again . . .”

“This will make it stop, Professor,” Harry said, his voice cracking as he tipped the seventh glass of potion into Dumbledore’s mouth.

Dumbledore began to cower as though invisible torturers surrounded him; his flailing hand almost knocked the refilled goblet from Harry’s trembling hands as he moaned, “Don’t hurt them, don’t

hurt them, please, please, it's my fault, hurt me instead . . .”

“Here, drink this, drink this, you'll be all right,” said Harry desperately, and once again Dumbledore obeyed him, opening his mouth even as he kept his eyes tight shut and shook from head to foot.

And now he fell forward, screaming again, hammering his fists upon the ground, while Harry filled the ninth goblet.

“Please, please, please, no . . . not that, not that, I'll do anything . . .”

“Just drink, Professor, just drink . . .”

Dumbledore drank like a child dying of thirst, but when he had finished, he yelled again as though his insides were on fire. “No more, please, no more . . .”

Harry scooped up a tenth gobletful of potion and felt the crystal scrape the bottom of the basin.

“We're nearly there, Professor. Drink this, drink it. . . .”

He supported Dumbledore's shoulders and again, Dumbledore drained the glass; then Harry was on his feet once more, refilling the goblet as Dumbledore began to scream in more anguish than ever, “I want to die! I want to die! Make it stop, make it stop, I want to die!”

“Drink this, Professor. Drink this. . . .”

Dumbledore drank, and no sooner had he finished than he yelled, “KILL ME!”

“This — this one will!” gasped Harry. “Just drink this . . . It'll be over . . . all over!”

Dumbledore gulped at the goblet, drained every last drop, and then, with a great, rattling gasp, rolled over onto his face.

“No!” shouted Harry, who had stood to refill the goblet again;

instead he dropped the cup into the basin, flung himself down beside Dumbledore, and heaved him over onto his back; Dumbledore's glasses were askew, his mouth agape, his eyes closed. "No," said Harry, shaking Dumbledore, "no, you're not dead, you said it wasn't poison, wake up, wake up — *Rennervate!*" he cried, his wand pointing at Dumbledore's chest; there was a flash of red light but nothing happened. "*Rennervate* — sir — please —"

Dumbledore's eyelids flickered; Harry's heart leapt.

"Sir, are you — ?"

"Water," croaked Dumbledore.

"Water," panted Harry. "Yes —"

He leapt to his feet and seized the goblet he had dropped in the basin; he barely registered the golden locket lying curled beneath it.

"*Aguamenti!*" he shouted, jabbing the goblet with his wand.

The goblet filled with clear water; Harry dropped to his knees beside Dumbledore, raised his head, and brought the glass to his lips — but it was empty. Dumbledore groaned and began to pant.

"But I had some — wait — *Aguamenti!*" said Harry again, pointing his wand at the goblet. Once more, for a second, clear water gleamed within it, but as he approached Dumbledore's mouth, the water vanished again.

"Sir, I'm trying, I'm trying!" said Harry desperately, but he did not think that Dumbledore could hear him; he had rolled onto his side and was drawing great, rattling breaths that sounded agonizing. "*Aguamenti — Aguamenti — AGUAMENTI!*"

The goblet filled and emptied once more. And now Dumbledore's breathing was fading. His brain whirling in panic, Harry knew,

instinctively, the only way left to get water, because Voldemort had planned it so . . .

He flung himself over to the edge of the rock and plunged the goblet into the lake, bringing it up full to the brim of icy water that did not vanish.

“Sir — here!” Harry yelled, and lunging forward, he tipped the water clumsily over Dumbledore’s face.

It was the best he could do, for the icy feeling on his arm not holding the cup was not the lingering chill of the water. A slimy white hand had gripped his wrist, and the creature to whom it belonged was pulling him, slowly, backward across the rock. The surface of the lake was no longer mirror-smooth; it was churning, and everywhere Harry looked, white heads and hands were emerging from the dark water, men and women and children with sunken, sightless eyes were moving toward the rock: an army of the dead rising from the black water.

“*Petrificus Totalus!*” yelled Harry, struggling to cling to the smooth, soaked surface of the island as he pointed his wand at the Inferius that had his arm. It released him, falling backward into the water with a splash; he scrambled to his feet, but many more Inferi were already climbing onto the rock, their bony hands clawing at its slippery surface, their blank, frosted eyes upon him, trailing waterlogged rags, sunken faces leering.

“*Petrificus Totalus!*” Harry bellowed again, backing away as he swiped his wand through the air; six or seven of them crumpled, but more were coming toward him. “*Impedimenta! Incarcerous!*”

A few of them stumbled, one or two of them bound in ropes, but

those climbing onto the rock behind them merely stepped over or on the fallen bodies. Still slashing at the air with his wand, Harry yelled, “*Sectumsempra! SECTUMSEMPRA!*”

But though gashes appeared in their sodden rags and their icy skin, they had no blood to spill: They walked on, unfeeling, their shrunken hands outstretched toward him, and as he backed away still farther, he felt arms enclose him from behind, thin, fleshless arms cold as death, and his feet left the ground as they lifted him and began to carry him, slowly and surely, back to the water, and he knew there would be no release, that he would be drowned, and become one more dead guardian of a fragment of Voldemort’s shattered soul. . . .

But then, through the darkness, fire erupted: crimson and gold, a ring of fire that surrounded the rock so that the Inferi holding Harry so tightly stumbled and faltered; they did not dare pass through the flames to get to the water. They dropped Harry; he hit the ground, slipped on the rock, and fell, grazing his arms, but scrambled back up, raising his wand and staring around.

Dumbledore was on his feet again, pale as any of the surrounding Inferi, but taller than any too, the fire dancing in his eyes; his wand was raised like a torch and from its tip emanated the flames, like a vast lasso, encircling them all with warmth.

The Inferi bumped into each other, attempting, blindly, to escape the fire in which they were enclosed. . . .

Dumbledore scooped the locket from the bottom of the stone basin and stowed it inside his robes. Wordlessly, he gestured to Harry to come to his side. Distracted by the flames, the Inferi seemed unaware that their quarry was leaving as Dumbledore led Harry back to the

boat, the ring of fire moving with them, around them, the bewildered Inferi accompanying them to the water's edge, where they slipped gratefully back into their dark waters.

Harry, who was shaking all over, thought for a moment that Dumbledore might not be able to climb into the boat; he staggered a little as he attempted it; all his efforts seemed to be going into maintaining the ring of protective flame around them. Harry seized him and helped him back to his seat. Once they were both safely jammed inside again, the boat began to move back across the black water, away from the rock, still encircled by that ring of fire, and it seemed that the Inferi swarming below them did not dare resurface.

"Sir," panted Harry, "sir, I forgot — about fire — they were coming at me and I panicked —"

"Quite understandable," murmured Dumbledore. Harry was alarmed to hear how faint his voice was.

They reached the bank with a little bump and Harry leapt out, then turned quickly to help Dumbledore. The moment that Dumbledore reached the bank he let his wand hand fall; the ring of fire vanished, but the Inferi did not emerge again from the water. The little boat sank into the water once more; clanking and tinkling, its chain slithered back into the lake too. Dumbledore gave a great sigh and leaned against the cavern wall.

"I am weak. . . ." he said.

"Don't worry, sir," said Harry at once, anxious about Dumbledore's extreme pallor and by his air of exhaustion. "Don't worry, I'll get us back. . . . Lean on me, sir. . . ."

And pulling Dumbledore's uninjured arm around his shoulders,

Harry guided his headmaster back around the lake, bearing most of his weight.

“The protection was . . . after all . . . well-designed,” said Dumbledore faintly. “One alone could not have done it. . . . You did well, very well, Harry. . . .”

“Don’t talk now,” said Harry, fearing how slurred Dumbledore’s voice had become, how much his feet dragged. “Save your energy, sir. . . . We’ll soon be out of here. . . .”

“The archway will have sealed again. . . . My knife . . .”

“There’s no need, I got cut on the rock,” said Harry firmly. “Just tell me where. . . .”

“Here . . .”

Harry wiped his grazed forearm upon the stone: Having received its tribute of blood, the archway reopened instantly. They crossed the outer cave, and Harry helped Dumbledore back into the icy seawater that filled the crevice in the cliff.

“It’s going to be all right, sir,” Harry said over and over again, more worried by Dumbledore’s silence than he had been by his weakened voice. “We’re nearly there. . . . I can Apparate us both back. . . . Don’t worry. . . .”

“I am not worried, Harry,” said Dumbledore, his voice a little stronger despite the freezing water. “I am with you.”

Die Grot

Harry ruik die sout en hoor die aanstormende branders; 'n ligte, koue briesie waai sy hare deurmekaar terwyl hy na die maanverligte see en sterbesaaide lug kyk. Hy staan op 'n hoë, donker rots, met water wat onder hom maal en skuim. Hy kyk oor sy skouer. 'n Rotswand toring loodreg bo hom uit, swart en onbekend. 'n Paar groot rotse soos die een waarop Harry en Dumbledore staan, lyk asof hulle een of ander tyd in die verlede van die rotswand afgebreek het. Dit is 'n onherbergsame, barre plek; al wat daar is, is see en rots, nêrens 'n boom of gras of sand nie.

“Wat dink jy?” wil Dumbledore weet. Hy vra dit asof hy by Harry wil weet of dit 'n goeie plek is om piekniek te hou.

“Het hulle die weeshuis se kinders hiernatoe gebring?” vra Harry, wat hom nie 'n minder aangename plek vir 'n daguitstappie kan voorstel nie.

“Nie na dié presiese plek toe nie,” sê Dumbledore. “Daar is 'n klein dorpie omtrent halfpad teen die kranse op agter ons. Hulle het die weeskinders soontoe geneem om 'n bietjie seelug te kry en die branders te kan sien. Nee, ek dink dit was net Tom Riddle en sy jeugdige slagoffers wat dit tot hier gewaag het. Geen Moggel kan by hierdie rotswand opkom tensy hy 'n buitengewoon goeie bergklimmer is nie, en bote kan dit nie naby die kranse waag nie; die waters hier rond is te gevaarlik. Ek dink Riddle het afgeklim; towerkuns sou beter as toue gedeug het. En hy het twee jong kinders saam met hom gebring, moontlik vir die genot om hulle te terroriseer. Ek dink net om tot hier te kom moes hy hulle al angsbevange gemaak het, of wat sê jy?”

Harry kyk weer teen die krans op en kry hoendervleis.

“Maar sy eindbestemming – en ons s'n – is 'n entjie verder aan. Kom.”

Dumbledore wink vir Harry tot reg op die rand van die rots waar 'n aantal getande kepe vastrapplek verskaf sodat 'n mens kan afklim tot by die groot rotsklippe wat halfpad in die water naby die krans

lê. Dit is 'n verradelike paadjie af; Dumbledore se verskrompelde hand bemoeilik sake nog verder en hy beweeg stadig ondertoe. Die rotse laer af is glibberig van die seewater. Harry voel hoe vlae koue soutsproei hom in die gesig slaan.

“Lumos,” sê Dumbledore toe hy by die onderste rots naaste aan die krans uitkom. 'n Duisend goue ligspikkels glinster op die water se donker oppervlak 'n paar voet onder die plek waar hy hurk; die swart rotsmuur langs hom word ook verlig.

“Sien jy?” sê Dumbledore sag en lig sy towerstaf effens hoër. Harry sien 'n skeur in die krans waarby daar donker water inmaal.

“Jy gee nie om om bietjie nat te word nie?”

“Nee,” sê Harry.

“Haal dan jou Onsigbaarheidsmantel af – jy't dit nie nou meer nodig nie – en kom ons spring in.”

En met die skielike ratsheid van 'n baie jonger man gly Dumbledore by die rotsklip af, beland in die see en begin swem met perfekte borsslag na die donker spleet in die rotswand terwyl hy sy towerstaf tussen sy tande vasbyt. Harry haal sy Mantel af, druk dit in sy sak en volg.

Die water is ysig; Harry se deurweekte klere bol rondom hom en trek hom af. Hy neem diep asemteue wat sy neus met die skerp geur van sout en seewier vul en swem agter die glinsterende liggie aan wat nou al hoe kleiner word en dieper by die krans inbeweeg.

Die rotsskeur mond ná 'n entjie uit in 'n donker tunnel wat Harry weet met hooggety vol water sal wees. Die slymbedekte mure is skaars drie voet uitmekaar en blink soos nat teer in die verbygaande lig van Dumbledore se towerstaf. 'n Bietjie verder draai die gang na links en Harry sien dit gaan ver by die krans in. Hy swem nog steeds agter Dumbledore aan; die punte van sy verkleumde vingers raak kort-kort aan die ruwe, nat rots.

Dan sien hy hoe Dumbledore verder vorentoe uit die water klim; sy silwer hare en donker kleed glinster. Toe Harry by dieselfde plek kom, sien hy daar is trappies wat tot binne-in 'n groot grot lei. Hy klouter daarmee op met water wat uit sy papnat klere stroom en kom uit in die stil, vrieskoue lug. Harry bewe onbeheerbaar.

Dumbledore staan in die middel van die grot en hou sy towerstaf omhoog terwyl hy stadig in die rondte draai en die mure en plafon bestudeer.

“Ja, dit is die plek,” sê Dumbledore.

“Hoe weet professor?” vra Harry in 'n fluisterstem.

“Hier is al towerkuns beoefen,” sê Dumbledore doodeenvoudig.

Harry weet nie of hy bewe omdat hy tot in sy ruggraat koud kry of omdat hy ook van die towermag hier bewus is nie. Hy kyk hoe Dumbledore aanhoudend op een plek in die rondte draai en blykbaar konsentreer op dinge wat Harry nie kan sien nie.

“Dit is slegs die voorkamer, die ingangsportaal,” sê Dumbledore ná ’n oomblik of twee. “Ons moet binnekant uitkom ... Nou is dit die Heer Voldemort se hindernisse wat in ons pad staan eerder as dié wat die natuur gemaak het ...”

Dumbledore loop tot by die grot se muur en streel met sy swart verbrande vingerpunte daaroor terwyl hy woorde fluister in ’n vreemde taal wat Harry nie verstaan nie. Dumbledore loop twee keer reg rondom die grot, raak aan soveel van die ruwe rots as wat hy kan, talm nou en dan, beweeg sy vingers heen en weer oor ’n spesifieke plek, tot hy uiteindelik gaan staan en sy hand plat teen die muur druk.

“Hier,” sê hy. “Ons gaan hier in. Die ingang is versteek.”

Harry vra nie vir Dumbledore hoe hy dit weet nie. Hy het ’n towenaar dinge nog nooit só sien uitpluis deur net te kyk en te vat nie, maar Harry het lankal geleer ontploffings en rookwalms is dikwels eerder tekens van onbekwaamheid as bedrewenheid.

Dumbledore staan weg van die grot se muur af en rig sy towerstaf op die rots. Vir ’n oomblik verskyn daar ’n geboë buitelyn, gloeiend wit asof daar ’n sterk lig agter die kraak is.

“P-professor het dit reggekry!” sê Harry klappertand, maar die woorde is skaars uit sy mond of the buitelyn verdwyn en die rots is weer so kaal en solied soos altyd. Dumbledore kyk om.

“Harry, ek is jammer, ek het vergeet,” sê hy. Hy wys met sy towerstaf na Harry en dadelik is Harry se klere so warm en droog asof dit voor ’n vuur gehang het.

“Dankie,” sê Harry dankbaar, maar Dumbledore se aandag is alreeds weer by die soliede grotmuur. Hy probeer nie meer enige towerkunsies uithaal nie; hy staan eenvoudig daar en kyk stip daarna asof daar iets baie interessants op geskryf is. Harry staan botstil; hy wil nie Dumbledore se konsentrasie verbreek nie.

En toe, ná twee volle minute, sê Dumbledore sag: “Ag nee, hoe primitief.”

“Wat is dit, Professor?”

“Ek dink,” sê Dumbledore terwyl hy sy onbeseerde hand by sy kleed insteek en ’n kort silwer mes uithaal (die soort wat Harry gebruik om bestanddele vir towerdrankies mee op te kerf), “daar word van ons verwag om te betaal voor ons ingaan.”

“Betaal?” vra Harry. “Moet ons vir die deur iets gee?”

“Ja,” sê Dumbledore. “Bloed, as ek my nie misgis nie.”

“Bloed?”

“Ek het gesê dis primitief,” sê Dumbledore en klink minagtend, selfs teleurgesteld, asof Voldemort nie voldoen aan die hoë standaard wat Dumbledore van hom verwag nie. “Die idee, soos ek seker is jy kan aflei, is dat jou vyand hom- of haarself moet verswak om te mag binnegaan. Weer eens kan die Heer Voldemort nie insien dat daar baie erger dinge as fisieke besering is nie.”

“Ja, maar nogtans, as dit kan keer dat ’n mens ...” sê Harry, wat al genoeg pyn ervaar het om nie gretig te wees vir nóg nie.

“Soms is dit egter onvermydelik,” sê Dumbledore terwyl hy sy kleed se mou oprol en sy beseerde hand se voorarm ontbloot.

“Professor!” protesteer Harry en kom vinnig nader toe Dumbledore sy mes oplig. “Ek sal dit doen; ek’s –”

Hy weet nie wat hy wou sê nie – jonger, fikser? Maar Dumbledore glimlag net. Daar is ’n silwer flits en ’n rooi straal spuit die rotswand vol donker, glinsterende druppels.

“Dis baie bedagsaam van jou, Harry,” sê Dumbledore en trek sy towerstaf se punt oor die diep sny wat hy in sy arm gemaak het sodat dit oombliklik toegaan, net soos wat Snape met Malfoy se wonde gedoen het. “Maar jou bloed is baie meer as myne werd. A, lyk my dit werk.”

Die gloeiende silwer boog verskyn weer teen die muur en hierdie keer doof dit nie weg nie: die bloedbespatte rots aan die binnekant van die buitelyn verdwyn eenvoudig en vorm ’n opening na wat soos algehele donkerte lyk.

“Bly agter my,” sê Dumbledore en hy loop deur die gewelfde ingang. Harry volg kort op sy hakke en steek sy eie towerstaf haastig aan terwyl hy instap.

’n Onheilspellende toneel doem voor hulle op: Hulle staan op die rand van ’n yslike swart meer (so groot dat Harry nie die oewer aan die ander kant kan sien nie) binne ’n spelonk wat so groot is dat ’n mens nie sy dak kan sien nie. Daar skyn ’n mistige groen lig ver weg op ’n plek wat soos die middel van die meer lyk en dit word in doodstil water weerkaats. Die groenerige gloed en die lig uit die twee towerstawwe is al wat die andersins fluweelagtige swartheid verbreek, hoewel hulle strale nie soveel lig gooi as wat Harry sou verwag het nie. Hierdie donkerte is op ’n manier digter as gewone donkerte.

“Kom ons stap,” sê Dumbledore sag. “Maar oppas om nie in die water te trap nie. Bly na aan my.”

Hy begin met die rand van die meer langs loop en Harry bly reg agter hom. Hulle voetstappe maak harde eggogeluide op die smal

rotsstrook wat die water omring. Hulle stap verder en verder, maar die uitsig verander nie: Aan hulle een kant is die ruwe spelonkmuur; aan die ander kant die eindeloos uitgestrekte, gladde, glasagtige swartheid met daardie geheimsinnige groen gloed wat van reg uit die middel kom. Die plek en die stilte maak Harry benoud en op sy senuwees.

“Professor?” vra hy uiteindelik. “Dink u die Horcrux is hier?”

“O ja,” sê Dumbledore. “Ja, ek is seker dit is. Die vraag is, hoe kom ons daarby uit?”

“Kan ons nie ... kan ons nie net ’n Ontbiedspreuk probeer nie?” vra Harry, wat seker is dit is ’n simpel voorstel, maar baie gretiger is as wat hy wil erken om so gou moontlik uit hierdie plek te kom.

“Ons kan beslis,” sê Dumbledore en stop so skielik dat Harry amper in hom vasloop. “Hoekom doen jy dit nie?”

“Ek? O ... oukei ...”

Harry het dit nie verwag nie, maar hy maak keel skoon en sê hard met sy towerstaf omhoog: “*Accio Horcrux!*”

Met ’n geraas wat soos ’n ontploffing klink, verrys daar iets baie groots en bleeks uit die donker water omtrent twintig voet weg; voor Harry kan sien wat dit is, verdwyn dit weer met ’n harde plas wat groot, diep golwe oor die spieëlagtige oppervlak uitstoot. Harry spring geskok weg en beland teen die muur; sy hart klop kliphard wanneer hy na Dumbledore toe omdraai.

“Wat was dit?”

“Iets wat blykbaar reg is om te reageer as ons dit sou waag om aan die Horcrux te vat.”

Harry kyk terug oor die water. Die meer se oppervlak skitter weer soos swart glas; die golwe het onnatuurlik vinnig verdwyn, maar Harry se hart klop nog steeds wild.

“Het professor gedink dit gaan gebeur?”

“Ek het gedink iets gaan gebeur as ons ’n ooglopende poging aanwend om die Horcrux in die hande te kry. Dit was ’n goeie idee, Harry; beslis die eenvoudigste manier om uit te vind waarteen ons hier te staan gaan kom.”

“Maar ons weet nie wat daai ding is nie,” sê Harry en kyk na die onheilspellend gladde water.

“Jy bedoel, wat daai goed is nie,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek twyfel sterk of daar net een van hulle is. Sal ons verder loop?”

“Professor?”

“Ja, Harry?”

“Dink u ons sal by die meer moet ingaan?”

“Daarby ingaan? Net as ons baie ongelukkig is.”

“U dink nie die Horcrux is op die bodem nie?”

“O nee ... Ek dink die Horcrux is in die *middel*.”

En Dumbledore wys na die mistige groen lig in die middel van die meer.

“So ons gaan die meer moet oorsteek om daarby uit te kom?”

“Ja, ek dink so.”

Harry sê niks. Al waaraan hy kan dink, is watermonsters, reuse-slange, demone en watergeeste ...

“Aha,” sê Dumbledore en hy gaan staan weer; hierdie keer loop Harry wél in hom vas; vir 'n oomblik steier hy aan die rand van die donker water, maar Dumbledore se onbeseerde hand sluit stewig om sy boarm en trek hom terug. “Jammer, Harry; ek moes jou gewaarsku het. Staan asseblief teen die muur; ek dink ek het die plek gekry.”

Harry het nie 'n benul wat Dumbledore bedoel nie; hierdie donker deel van die oewer lyk sover hy kan uitmaak presies nes al die ander, maar blykbaar het Dumbledore iets spesiaals daaraan opgemerk. Hierdie keer voel hy nie met sy hand aan die rotsmuur nie, maar aan die dun lug, asof hy verwag om iets onsigbaars te vind en raak te vat.

“Ohoo,” sê Dumbledore 'n paar sekondes later tevrede. Sy hand vat iets wat Harry nie kan sien nie in die lug bo hulle vas. Dumbledore beweeg nader aan die water; Harry kyk gespanne hoe hy met die punte van sy gespeskoene reg op die rand van die rotsstrook gaan staan. Dumbledore hou sy hand nog steeds gebal in die lug en dan lig hy sy towerstaf met sy ander hand en raak met die punt aan sy vuus.

Daar verskyn dadelik 'n groen koperketting uit die niet; dit strek vanuit die dieptes van die water tot in Dumbledore se toe hand. Dumbledore tik teen die ketting; dit begin soos 'n slang deur sy vuus gly en gaan lê opgerol op die grond met 'n geklingel wat hard teen die rotsmure weerklink terwyl dit iets uit die dieptes van die swart water trek. Harry snak toe die spokerige boeg van 'n bootjie deur die oppervlak breek; die klein vaartuigie gloei so groen soos die ketting en dryf sonder om 'n golfie te maak na die plek op die oewer waar Harry en Dumbledore staan.

“Hoe het u geweet dis daar?” vra Harry verstom.

“Towerkuns laat altyd spore,” sê Dumbledore wanneer die bootjie sag teen die oewer stamp, “en soms baie duidelike spore. Ek was Tom Riddle se onderwyser. Ek ken sy styl.”

“Is ... is die boot veilig?”

“O ja, ek dink so. Voldemort moes 'n manier skep om die meer oor te steek sonder om die wesens wat hy daarin gesit het, te lok, ingeval hy sy Horcrux ooit wil besoek of verwyder.”

“So die goed in die water sal niks aan ons doen as ons in Voldemort se boot is nie?”

“Ek dink ons moet ons voorberei op die feit dat hulle in een of ander stadium sal besef ons is nie die Heer Voldemort nie. Tot dusver vorder ons egter nog goed. Hulle het ons toegelaat om die boot laat te opkom.”

“Maar hoekom het hulle dit toegelaat?” vra Harry, wat nie die drogbeeld kan afskud van tentakels wat uit die donker water verskyn sodra hulle ver genoeg van die oewer af is nie.

“Voldemort moet redelik seker gewees het dat slegs ’n baie groot towenaar die boot sou kon kry,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek dink hy was bereid om die kans te waag, want volgens hom was dit ’n uiters onwaarskynlike moontlikheid, en hy sou in elk geval ander hindernisse verder vorentoe opgestel het wat net hy kan oorkom. Maar laat ons kyk of hy reg was.”

Harry kyk weer af in die bootjie. Dit is regtig baie klein.

“Dit lyk nie of dit vir twee mense gemaak is nie. Sal dit ons al twee kan dra? Sal ons nie te swaar wees nie?”

Dumbledore lag sag.

“Voldemort sou hom nie gesteur het aan die gewig wat sy meer oorsteek nie, maar veel eerder aan die hoeveelheid towerkrag. Ek dink daar is ’n paljas op hierdie boot sodat net een towenaar op ’n slag daarin kan seil.”

“Maar dan—?”

“Ek dink nie jy sal tel nie, Harry; jy is nog nie mondig en gekwalifiseerd nie. Voldemort sou nie verwag het dat ’n sestienjarige by hierdie plek sal uitkom nie: Ek dink dit is onwaarskynlik dat jou magte sal registreer in vergelyking met myne.”

Hierdie woorde gee Harry nie juis moed nie; miskien weet Dumbledore dit, want hy voeg by: “Voldemort se fout, Harry, Voldemort se fout ... ’n ouer persoon is dwaas en vergeetagtig as hy die jeug onderskat ... Reg, hierdie keer gaan jy eerste en maak seker jy raak nie aan die water nie.”

Dumbledore staan opsy en Harry klim versigtig in die bootjie. Hierna is dit Dumbledore se beurt; hulle sit ongemaklik ingeprop: Harry moet hurk en sy knieë steek uit oor die rand van die boot, wat dadelik begin beweeg. Die enigste geluid wat hulle hoor, is die sysagte geritsel van die boot se boeg wat deur die water klief; die boot beweeg sonder hulle hulp, asof ’n onsigbare tou dit na die lig in die middel toe trek. Dis nie lank nie of hulle kan nie meer die spelonk se mure sien nie; hulle kan net sowel op die oop see wees, behalwe dat hier geen golwe is nie.

Harry kyk af en sien hoe sy towerstaf se goue lig op die glimmende, glinsterende swart water weerkaats word terwyl hulle vorentoe beweeg. Die boot maak diep rimpels op die glasagtige oppervlak, groewe in die donker spieël ...

En toe sien Harry dit; dit is marmerwit en dryf net 'n paar duim onder die oppervlak.

“Professor!” roep hy uit en sy verskrikte stem eggo hard oor die stil water.

“Harry?”

“Ek dink ek het 'n hand in die water gesien – 'n mensehand!”

“Ja, ek is seker jy het,” sê Dumbledore kalm.

Harry staar in die water af op soek na die hand wat nou weer verdwyn het en hy voel die naarheid in sy keel opstoot.

“So daardie ding wat by die water uitgespring het – ?”

Maar Harry kry sy antwoord voor Dumbledore iets kan sê; sy towerstaf se lig gly oor 'n nuwe strook water en hierdie keer sien hy 'n dooie man wat met sy gesig na bo 'n paar duim onder die oppervlak lê: Die man se oë lyk beneweld asof dit met spinnerakke toegeweef is; sy hare en kleed warrel soos rook om hom.

“Daar is lyke hierin!” sê Harry en sy stem klink baie hoër as gewoonlik en glad nie soos sy eie nie.

“Ja,” sê Dumbledore doodluiters, “maar ons hoef ons nie op die oomblik oor hulle te bekommer nie.”

“Op die oomblik?” herhaal Harry en skeur sy oë los van die water om na Dumbledore te kyk.

“Nie terwyl hulle net vreedsaam onder ons ronddryf nie,” sê Dumbledore. “Ons hoef nie 'n dooie liggaam te vrees nie, Harry; net so min soos wat ons die donker hoef te vrees. Die Heer Voldemort vrees albei natuurlik heimlik en stem dus nie saam nie. Maar hy toon daardeur weer eens sy gebrek aan insig. Wanneer ons die dood en die donker in die gesig staar, is dit die onbekende wat ons vrees, niks meer nie.”

Harry sê niks; hy wil nie stry nie, maar vir hom is die gedagte dat daar lyke om en onder hulle ronddryf vreesaanjaend, en wat meer is, hy glo glad nie hulle is nie gevaarlik nie.

“Maar een van hulle het uitgespring,” sê hy terwyl hy sy stem so gelykmatig en kalm soos Dumbledore s'n probeer hou. “Toe ek die Horcrux probeer Ontbied het, het daar 'n liggaam uit die meer gespring.”

“Ja,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek is seker hulle sal minder vreedsaam wees wanneer ons die Horcrux eers in die hande het. Maar soos baie wesens wat in koue en donkerde woon, vrees hulle lig en warmte,

wat ons derhalwe sal ontbied om ons te kom help as dit nodig sou word. Vuur, Harry,” voeg Dumbledore met ’n glimlag by in antwoord op die verwilderde uitdrukking op Harry se gesig.

“O ja ... reg ...” sê Harry vinnig. Hy draai sy kop om te kyk na die groen gloed waarheen die boot nog steeds onverbiddelik seil. Hy kan nie maak of hy nie bang is nie. Die groot swart meer wat wemel van dooies ... dit voel soos ure en ure gelede dat hy professor Trelawney raakgeloop en vir Ron en Hermione die Felix Felicis gegee het ... Hy wens skielik hy het vir hulle ordentlik tot siens gesê ... en dat hy Ginny nog een keer kon gesien het ...

“Amper daar,” sê Dumbledore opgewek.

En sowaar, die groenerige lig word uiteindelik groter en binne minute kom die boot tot stilstand en stamp liggies teen iets wat Harry eers nie kan sien nie, maar in sy towerstaf se lig sien hy hulle het ’n klein eilandjie van gladde rots in die middel van die meer bereik.

“Oppas dat jy nie aan die water raak nie,” sê Dumbledore weer toe Harry uit die bootjie klim.

Die eiland is niks groter as Dumbledore se kantoor nie. Dit is ’n plat, donker rotsbank waarop daar niks anders is nie as die bron van die groenerige lig, wat van naderby baie helderder lyk. Harry knip sy oë; hy dink eers dit is een of ander soort lamp, maar dan sien hy die lig kom uit ’n klipkom wat baie soos die Peinssif lyk en op ’n staander neergesit is.

Dumbledore stap na die kom toe en Harry volg hom. Sy aan sy kyk hulle daarin af. Die kom is gevul met ’n smaraggroen vloeistof wat soos fosfor gloei.

“Wat is dit?” vra Harry sag.

“Ek is nie seker nie,” sê Dumbledore. “Maar dis iets wat my meer as bloed en lyke bekommer.”

Dumbledore stoot sy kleed se mou op oor sy swart hand en reik met die punte van sy verbrande vingers uit na die towerdrankie se oppervlak.

“Nee, professor, moenie daaraan raak nie – !”

“Ek kan nie daaraan raak nie,” sê Dumbledore en glimlag effens. “Sien jy? Ek kan nie nader as dit kom nie. Probeer jy.”

Met groot oë laat sak Harry sy hand in die kom en probeer aan die towerdrankie raak. Maar daar is ’n onsigbare versperring wat keer dat hy daaraan kan vat. Dit maak nie saak hoe hard hy probeer nie; sy vingers word deur ’n soliede en onversetlike luglaag weggehou.

“Uit die pad, asseblief, Harry,” sê Dumbledore.

Hy lig sy towerstaf en maak ingewikkelde bewegings bo die oppervlak van die towerdrankie terwyl hy geluidloos prewel. Daar

gebeur niks nie, behalwe miskien dat die kom se inhoud effens helderder begin gloei. Harry bly stil terwyl Dumbledore werk, maar ná 'n ruk laat sak Dumbledore sy towerstaf en Harry voel dit is veilig om weer te praat.

“Dink professor die Horcrux is daarin?”

“O ja.” Dumbledore kyk van nóg nader by die kom in. Harry sien hoe sy gesig onderstebo deur die groen vloeistof se gladde oppervlak weerkaats word. “Maar hoe kom mens daarby uit? Jy kan nie jou hand by hierdie towerdrankie insteek nie; jy kan dit nie laat Verdwyn of in twee deel of uitskep of opsuig nie en jy kan dit ook nie Transfigureer, Betower of op enige ander manier van vorm laat verander nie.”

Amper ingedagte lig Dumbledore sy towerstaf weer, draai dit een keer in die lug in die rondte en vang dan die kristalbeker wat hy uit die niet opgetower het.

“Al slotsom waartoe ek kan kom, is dat hierdie towerdrankie veronderstel is om gedrink te word.”

“Wat?” sê Harry. “Nee!”

“Ja, ek dink so: slegs deur dit te drink, kan ek die kom leegmaak en sien wat onderin lê.

“Maar wat as dit – professor doodmaak?”

“O, ek twyfel of dit só sal werk,” sê Dumbledore ongestoord. “Die Heer Voldemort sal nie die persoon wat hierdie eiland bereik het, wil doodmaak nie.”

Harry kan dit nie glo nie. Is dit nog meer van Dumbledore se waansinnige vasberadenheid om die goeie in almal raak te sien?

“Professor,” sê Harry en probeer om sy stem redelik te hou, “professor, dis *Voldemort* met wie ons –”

“Ek is jammer, Harry; ek moes gesê het hy sou die persoon wat hierdie eiland bereik het nie *onmiddellik* wou doodmaak nie,” korrigeer Dumbledore homself. “Hy sou die persoon lank genoeg aan die lewe wou hou om uit te vind presies hoe hy of sy deur sy verdedigings-netwerk gekom het en, die belangrikste van alles, hoekom die persoon so vasberade was om die kom te ledig. Moenie vergeet nie, die Heer Voldemort glo hy is die enigste een wat van sy Horcruxe weet.”

Harry wil weer iets sê, maar hierdie keer lig Dumbledore sy hand vir stilte; hy frons effens terwyl hy na die smaraggroen vloeistof kyk en diep dink.

“Een ding is seker,” sê hy uiteindelik, “hierdie towerdrankie moet 'n uitwerking hê wat sal verhoed dat ek die Horcrux kan verwyder. Dit kan my verlam, my laat vergeet hoekom ek hier is, my in pyn dompel om my aandag af te lei, of my op 'n ander manier buite

aksie stel. As dit gebeur, Harry, sal dit jou werk wees om seker te maak dat ek aanhou drink, selfs al moet jy die towerdrankie by my protesterende mond ingooi. Verstaan jy?"

Hulle oë ontmoet bokant die kom; albei se bleek gesigte skyn dof in die vreemde groen lig. Harry praat nie. Is dit hoekom hy saamgenooi is – sodat hy Dumbledore kan dwing om 'n towerdrankie wat hom dalk onuitstaanbare pyn sal laat verduur, te drink?

"Onthou jy," vra Dumbledore, "op watter voorwaarde ek jou saam met my gebring het?"

Harry huiwer en kyk in die blou oë wat nou groen geword het in die kom se weerkaatsing.

"Maar wat as – ?"

"Jy het gesweer om enige bevel wat ek jou gee, te gehoorsaam, het jy nie?"

"Ja, maar –"

"Ek het jou gewaarsku, het ek nie, dat dinge gevaarlik mag word?"

"Ja," sê Harry, "maar –"

"Nou ja," sê Dumbledore terwyl hy al twee sy moue terugstoot en die leë beker oplig, "jy het jou bevele."

"Hoekom kan ek dit nie eerder drink nie?" vra Harry desperaat.

"Omdat ek baie ouer, baie slimmer en baie minder kosbaar is," sê Dumbledore. "Vir eens en vir altyd, Harry; het ek jou woord dat jy alles in jou vermoë sal doen om my te laat aanhou drink?"

"Kan ons nie – ?"

"Het ek jou woord?"

"Maar –"

"Jou woord, Harry."

"Ek – nou goed, maar –"

Voor Harry nog verder kan protesteer, laat sak Dumbledore die kristalbeker in die towerdrankie. Vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde hoop Harry hy sal nie met die beker aan die vloeistof kan raak nie, maar die kristal glip soos niks anders wou nie onder die oppervlak in; toe die beker tot bo vol is, lig Dumbledore dit na sy mond.

"Gesondheid, Harry."

En hy drink die beker leeg. Harry hou hom angsbevange dop. Sy hande klou só styf aan die kom se rand vas dat sy vingerpunte dood is.

"Professor?" vra hy benoud toe Dumbledore die leë beker laat sak. "Hoe voel u?"

Dumbledore skud sy kop en sy oë is toe. Harry wonder of hy in pyn verkeer. Dumbledore dompel die beker blindweg terug in die kom, maak dit weer vol en drink alles weer op.

In stilte drink Dumbledore drie bekere vol van die towerdrankie. En dan, halfpad deur die vierde beker, steier hy en val vooroor teen die kom. Sy oë is nog steeds toe en hy haal swaar asem.

“Professor Dumbledore?” vra Harry gespanne. “Kan u my hoor?”

Dumbledore antwoord nie. Sy gesig vertrek asof hy diep slaap maar ’n aaklige nagmerrie het. Sy greep op die beker verslap; die towerdrankie is op die punt om uit te stort. Harry steek sy hand uit, gryp die kristalbeker en hou dit regop.

“Kan professor my hoor?” herhaal hy hard en sy stem eggo deur die spelonk.

Dumbledore snak en praat dan in ’n stem wat Harry nie herken nie, want hy het Dumbledore nog nooit so bang gehoor klink nie.

“Ek wil nie ... Moenie my dwing nie ...”

Harry staar na die spierwit gesig wat hy so goed ken, na die krom neus en halfmaanbril, en weet nie wat om te doen nie.

“... hou nie hiervan nie ... wil ophou ...” kerm Dumbledore.

“U ... u kan nie ophou nie, professor,” sê Harry. “Onthou, u moet aanhou drink. U het vir my gesê u moet aanhou drink. Hier ...”

Harry haat homself en kan nie glo hy doen dit nie, maar hy sit die beker weer voor Dumbledore se mond en keer dit om sodat Dumbledore die res van die towerdrankie moet drink.

“Nee ...” kreun hy toe Harry die beker weer by die kom indruk en dit vir hom vol maak. “Ek wil nie ... ek wil nie ... Los my ...”

“Dis oukei, professor,” sê Harry en sy hand bewe. “Dis oukei; ek is hier –”

“Laat dit ophou, laat dit ophou,” smeek Dumbledore.

“Ja ... ja, dit sal dit laat ophou,” jok Harry. Hy keer die beker se inhoud in Dumbledore se oop mond uit.

Dumbledore gil; sy kreet weergalm deur die ontsaglike groot ruimte en oor die dooie swart water.

“Nee, nee, nee ... nee ... ek kan nie ... ek kan nie, moet my nie dwing nie, ek wil nie ...”

“Dis oukei, professor, dis oukei!” sê Harry hard en sy hande bewe so erg dat hy sukkel om die beker ’n sesde keer vol te skep; die kom is nou halfpad leeg. “Daar gaan niks met u gebeur nie; u is veilig; dis net u verbeelding, ek sweer dis net u verbeelding – drink dit nou, toe, drink dit ...”

En Dumbledore drink dit gehoorsaam asof dit ’n teenmiddel is wat Harry hom aanbied, maar toe hy die beker leeggedrink het, sak hy op sy knieë neer en begin onbeheerbaar ruk.

“Dis alles my skuld, alles my skuld,” snik hy, “laat dit asseblief ophou; ek weet ek het verkeerd gedoen, o asseblief, laat dit net ophou en ek sal nooit ooit weer nie ...”

“Dit sal dit laat ophou, professor,” sê Harry en sy stem breek terwyl hy die sewende beker vol in Dumbledore se mond omkeer.

Dumbledore begin ineenkrimp asof onsigbare martelaars hom omring; sy hand slaan so woedend dat hy amper die vol beker uit Harry se bewende hande klap terwyl hy kerm: “Moenie hulle seermaak nie, moenie hulle seermaak nie, asseblief, asseblief; dis my skuld, maak my eerder seer ...”

“Hier, drink dit, drink dit en als sal oukei wees,” sê Harry desperaat en Dumbledore gehoorsaam hom weer eens; hy maak sy mond oop, maar hy hou sy oë styf toe en ruk van kop tot tone.

En dan val hy vooroor, skree weer en hamer met sy vuiste op die rotsvloer terwyl Harry sy beker ’n negende keer vol maak.

“Asseblief, asseblief, asseblief, nee ... nie dit nie, nie dit nie, ek sal enigiets doen ...”

“Drink net, professor, drink dit net ...”

Dumbledore drink soos ’n kind wat doodgaan van dors, maar toe hy klaar is, gil hy weer asof sy binnegoed aan die brand is.

“Nie meer nie, asseblief, nie meer nie ...”

Harry skep ’n tiende beker vol towerdrankie uit en voel hoe die kristal die kom se bodem skraap.

“Ons is amper klaar, professor; drink nog, drink dit ...”

Hy hou Dumbledore aan sy skouers regop en Dumbledore drink die beker weer leeg. Harry kom regop en begin die beker weer vol maak toe Dumbledore angstiger as ooit skree: “Ek wil doodgaan! Ek wil doodgaan! Laat dit ophou, laat dit ophou; ek wil doodgaan!?”

“Drink dit, professor; drink dit net ...”

Dumbledore drink en hy is skaars klaar toe hy gil: “**MAAK MY DOOD!**”

“Hierdie – hierdie een sal!” sê Harry uitasem. “Drink net hierdie een ... dan is dit verby ... alles verby!”

Dumbledore drink die beker met een sluk leeg, tot die heel laaste druppel, snak dan diep en roggelend en rol om op sy gesig.

“Nee!” skree Harry, wat weer opgestaan het om die beker vol te maak; hy laat val die beker in die kom, buk langs Dumbledore en draai hom op sy rug. Dumbledore se bril sit skeef, sy mond hang oop en sy oë is toe. “Nee,” sê Harry en skud Dumbledore, “nee, u is nie dood nie; u het gesê dis nie gif nie; word wakker, word wakker – *Rennervate!*” skree hy en wys met sy towerstaf na Dumbledore se borskas; daar flits ’n rooi lig, maar niks gebeur nie. “*Rennervate* – professor – asseblief –”

Dumbledore se ooglede flikker, Harry se hart bokspring.

“Professor, is u – ?”

“Water,” sê Dumbledore skor.

“Water,” hyg Harry, “– ja –”

Hy spring weer regop, gryp die beker wat hy in die kom laat val het en registreer skaars die goue hangertjie wat daaronder opgekrul lê.

“Aguamenti!” gil hy en kap met sy towerstaf teen die beker.

Die beker word vol helder water; Harry val op sy knieë langs Dumbledore neer, lig sy kop en bring die beker tot by sy lippe – maar dit is leeg. Dumbledore kreun en begin hard hyg.

“Maar ek het dan – wag – Aguamenti!” sê Harry weer en rig sy towerstaf op die beker. Weer blink daar helder water binne-in, maar soos wat hy dit na Dumbledore se mond toe bring, verdwyn die water weer eens.

“Professor, ek probeer, ek probeer!” sê Harry wanhopig, maar hy twyfel of Dumbledore hom kan hoor; hy het op sy sy omgerol en haal hortend asem soos iemand wat in verskriklike pyn verkeer. “Aguamenti – Aguamenti – AUGUAMENTII!”

Die beker word weer soos voorheen vol en leeg. Dumbledore se asemhaling word nou al hoe sagter. Harry is totaal paniekbevange, maar instinktief weet hy wat is die enigste manier wat oorbly om water te kry, want Voldemort het dit só beplan ...

Hy hang oor die kant van die rots, doop die beker in die meer en skep dit tot bo toe vol met ysige water wat nie verdwyn nie.

“Professor – hier!” gil Harry. Hy beur vorentoe en gooi die water lomp oor Dumbledore se gesig uit.

Dit is al wat hy kan doen, want die ysige gevoel op sy arm wat nie die beker vashou nie, is nie die talmende koue van die water nie. ’n Slymerige wit hand het sy gewrig vasgegryp en die wese aan wie dit behoort, trek hom nou stadig terug oor die rots. Die meer se oppervlak is nie meer spieëlglad nie; dit borrel en bruis en oral waar Harry kyk, verskyn daar wit koppe en hande uit die donker water, mans en vrouens en kinders met hol oë wat nie kan sien nie beweeg na die rots toe; ’n leër van dooies verrys uit die swart water.

“Petrificus Totalus!” gil Harry en worstel om aan die eiland se gladde, nat oppervlak vas te klou terwyl hy sy towerstaf op die Inferius wat hom aan die arm vashou, rig; die ding laat los en val plonsend terug in die water. Harry sukkel orent, maar baie ander Inferi klim reeds tot op die rotsbank; hul benerige hande klou aan die glibberige oppervlak, hul leë, gevriesde oë staar hom aan, hul ingevalle gesigte gryns boosaardig.

“*Petrificus Totalus!*” bulder Harry weer en retireer terwyl hy sy towerstaf deur die lug swaai; ses of sewe van hulle sak inmekaar, maar daar kom nog van hulle aan. “*Impedimenta! Incarcerous!*”

’n Paar van hulle struikel, een of twee is met toue vasgebind, maar die ander wat agter hulle by die rotsbank opklim, tree net oor die liggame wat geval het. Harry swaai sy towerstaf verwoed rond en gil: “*Sectumsempra! SECTUMSEMPRA!*”

Maar al verskyn daar snye in hulle sopnat vodde en ysige velle, kom daar niks bloed uit nie; hulle hou gevoelloos aan met loop. Hulle gekrimpte hande is na Harry toe uitgestrek en hy retireer nog verder, maar dan voel hy arms wat hom van agter af toevou: dun, vleeslose arms so koud soos die dood. Sy voete word van die rotsbank af opgelig en hulle dra hom stadig maar seker terug water toe. Harry weet hy sal nie kan loskom nie; hy weet hy sal verdrink en een van die baie dooies word wat die Heer Voldemort se versplinterde siel bewaak ...

Maar dan, in die donkerte, vlam daar ’n vuur op: helderrooi en goud, ’n vuurring wat die rots omring sodat die Inferi wat Harry so styf vashou, struikel en aarsel; hulle waag dit nie om deur die vlamme tot in die water te loop nie. Hulle laat val Harry; hy tref die rotsbank, gly en skaaf sy arms nerfaf, maar hy beur regop, lig sy towerstaf en kyk om.

Dumbledore is weer op die been, so bleek soos enige van die omringende Inferi, maar ook langer as enige van hulle. Die vuur dans in sy oë; hy hou sy towerstaf hoog soos ’n flitslig en daar kom vlamme uit die punt, vlamme soos ’n reuse groot vangriem wat hulle in ’n sirkel van warmte omsluit.

Die Inferi stamp teen mekaar soos wat hulle blindelings probeer ontsnap van die vuur wat hulle omring ...

Dumbledore haal die hangertjie onder uit die kom en bêre dit binne-in sy kleed. Woordeloos beduie hy vir Harry om na sy kant toe te kom. Die Inferi se aandag word só deur die vlamme afgetrek dat hulle blykbaar nie besef hulle prooi kom weg nie. Dumbledore lei Harry terug na die bootjie; die vuurring beweeg saam met hulle, rondom hulle, en die verwilderde Inferi volg hulle tot op die rand van die rots, waar hulle dankbaar weer in hul donker waters ingly.

Harry bewee soos ’n riet en dink vir ’n oomblik Dumbledore gaan nie in die bootjie kan kom nie; hy struikel effens, want al sy aandag is daarop gevestig om die beskermende vuurring om hulle te hou. Harry kry hom beet en help hom tot op sy sitplek. Die oomblik dat hulle albei veilig in die boot is, begin dit terug oor die swart water beweeg, weg van die rots, maar nog steeds omgewe van die vuurring

en dit lyk nie of die Inferi wat onder hulle saamkoek dit sal waag om weer bo die oppervlak uit te kom nie.

“Professor,” hyg Harry, “professor, ek het vergeet – van die vuur – hulle het nader gekom en ek het paniekerig geraak –”

“Dis heeltemal verstaanbaar,” prewel Dumbledore. Harry is geskok oor hoe swak sy stem klink.

Hulle kom met ’n ligte stampie by die oewer aan; Harry spring uit en draai vinnig om om Dumbledore te help. Die oomblik dat Dumbledore aan wal kom, laat sak hy sy hand met die towerstaf; die vuurring verdwyn, maar die Inferi het nie weer uit die water opgekom nie. Die bootjie sink weer weg in die water en met ’n gerinkel en geklingel gly die ketting ook weer terug in die meer. Dumbledore gee ’n groot sug en leun teen die spelonk se muur.

“Ek is swak ...” sê hy.

“Toemaar, professor,” sê Harry dadelik, baie besorg oor hoe doodsbлек en moeg Dumbledore lyk. “Moenie bekommerd wees nie; ek sal ons hier uitkry ... Leun op my, professor ...”

Harry sit Dumbledore se onbeseerde arm om sy skouers en lei sy skoolhoof al om die meer langs terug terwyl hy die meeste van sy gewig dra.

“Die beskerming was ... op stuk van sake ... goed ontwerp,” sê Dumbledore flouurig. “Een mens op sy eie sou dit nie kon reggekry het nie ... Jy’t jou goed van jou taak gekwyt, Harry, baie goed ...”

“Moenie nou praat nie,” sê Harry, want Dumbledore praat al hoe onduideliker en sy voete sleep al hoe meer, “spaar u krag, professor ... Ons is nou-nou hier uit ...”

“Die ingang sal nou weer verseël wees ... My mes ...”

“Dis nie nodig nie; ek het my op die rots stukkend gesny,” sê Harry ferm. “Sê net vir my waar ...”

“Hier ...”

Harry vee met sy nerfaf voorarm oor die klipmuur: Tevrede met sy bloedhuldeblyk gaan die ingang dadelik weer oop. Hulle beweeg deur die buitenste grot en Harry help Dumbledore tot in die ysige water wat die skeur in die krans vul.

“Alles sal oukei wees, professor,” sê Harry oor en oor, meer bekommerd oor Dumbledore se stilte as wat hy vroeër was toe sy stem so swak geklink het. “Ons is amper daar ... Ek kan ons albei terug soontoe laat Appareer ... Moenie bekommerd wees nie ...”

“Ek is nie bekommerd nie, Harry,” sê Dumbledore en sy stem klink ’n bietjie sterker ten spyte van die vriesende water, “want ek is by jou.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



THE LIGHTNING-STRUCK TOWER

Once back under the starry sky, Harry heaved Dumbledore onto the top of the nearest boulder and then to his feet. Sodden and shivering, Dumbledore's weight still upon him, Harry concentrated harder than he had ever done upon his destination: Hogsmeade. Closing his eyes, gripping Dumbledore's arm as tightly as he could, he stepped forward into that feeling of horrible compression.

He knew it had worked before he opened his eyes: The smell of salt, the sea breeze had gone. He and Dumbledore were shivering and dripping in the middle of the dark High Street in Hogsmeade. For one horrible moment Harry's imagination showed him more Inferi

creeping toward him around the sides of shops, but he blinked and saw that nothing was stirring; all was still, the darkness complete but for a few streetlamps and lit upper windows.

“We did it, Professor!” Harry whispered with difficulty; he suddenly realized that he had a searing stitch in his chest. “We did it! We got the Horcrux!”

Dumbledore staggered against him. For a moment, Harry thought that his inexperienced Apparition had thrown Dumbledore off balance; then he saw his face, paler and damper than ever in the distant light of a streetlamp.

“Sir, are you all right?”

“I’ve been better,” said Dumbledore weakly, though the corners of his mouth twitched. “That potion . . . was no health drink. . . .”

And to Harry’s horror, Dumbledore sank onto the ground.

“Sir — it’s okay, sir, you’re going to be all right, don’t worry —”

He looked around desperately for help, but there was nobody to be seen and all he could think was that he must somehow get Dumbledore quickly to the hospital wing.

“We need to get you up to the school, sir. . . . Madam Pomfrey . . .”

“No,” said Dumbledore. “It is . . . Professor Snape whom I need. . . . But I do not think . . . I can walk very far just yet. . . .”

“Right — sir, listen — I’m going to knock on a door, find a place you can stay — then I can run and get Madam —”

“Severus,” said Dumbledore clearly. “I need Severus. . . .”

“All right then, Snape — but I’m going to have to leave you for a moment so I can —”

Before Harry could make a move, however, he heard running

footsteps. His heart leapt: Somebody had seen, somebody knew they needed help — and looking around he saw Madam Rosmerta scurrying down the dark street toward them on high-heeled, fluffy slippers, wearing a silk dressing gown embroidered with dragons.

“I saw you Apparate as I was pulling my bedroom curtains! Thank goodness, thank goodness, I couldn’t think what to — but what’s wrong with Albus?”

She came to a halt, panting, and stared down, wide-eyed, at Dumbledore.

“He’s hurt,” said Harry. “Madam Rosmerta, can he come into the Three Broomsticks while I go up to the school and get help for him?”

“You can’t go up there alone! Don’t you realize — haven’t you seen — ?”

“If you help me support him,” said Harry, not listening to her, “I think we can get him inside —”

“What has happened?” asked Dumbledore. “Rosmerta, what’s wrong?”

“The — the Dark Mark, Albus.”

And she pointed into the sky, in the direction of Hogwarts. Dread flooded Harry at the sound of the words. . . . He turned and looked.

There it was, hanging in the sky above the school: the blazing green skull with a serpent tongue, the mark Death Eaters left behind whenever they had entered a building . . . wherever they had murdered. . . .

“When did it appear?” asked Dumbledore, and his hand clenched painfully upon Harry’s shoulder as he struggled to his feet.

“Must have been minutes ago, it wasn’t there when I put the cat

out, but when I got upstairs —”

“We need to return to the castle at once,” said Dumbledore. “Rosmerta” — and though he staggered a little, he seemed wholly in command of the situation — “we need transport — brooms —”

“I’ve got a couple behind the bar,” she said, looking very frightened. “Shall I run and fetch — ?”

“No, Harry can do it.”

Harry raised his wand at once.

“Accio Rosmerta’s Brooms!”

A second later they heard a loud bang as the front door of the pub burst open; two brooms had shot out into the street and were racing each other to Harry’s side, where they stopped dead, quivering slightly at waist height.

“Rosmerta, please send a message to the Ministry,” said Dumbledore, as he mounted the broom nearest him. “It might be that nobody within Hogwarts has yet realized anything is wrong. . . . Harry, put on your Invisibility Cloak.”

Harry pulled his Cloak out of his pocket and threw it over himself before mounting his broom: Madam Rosmerta was already tottering back toward her pub as Harry and Dumbledore kicked off from the ground and rose up into the air. As they sped toward the castle, Harry glanced sideways at Dumbledore, ready to grab him should he fall, but the sight of the Dark Mark seemed to have acted upon Dumbledore like a stimulant: He was bent low over his broom, his eyes fixed upon the Mark, his long silver hair and beard flying behind him on the night air. And Harry too looked ahead at the skull, and fear swelled inside him like a venomous bubble, compressing his lungs,

driving all other discomfort from his mind. . . .

How long had they been away? Had Ron, Hermione, and Ginny's luck run out by now? Was it one of them who had caused the Mark to be set over the school, or was it Neville, or Luna, or some other member of the D.A.? And if it was . . . he was the one who had told them to patrol the corridors, he had asked them to leave the safety of their beds. . . . Would he be responsible, again, for the death of a friend?

As they flew over the dark, twisting lane down which they had walked earlier, Harry heard, over the whistling of the night air in his ears, Dumbledore muttering in some strange language again. He thought he understood why as he felt his broom shudder when they flew over the boundary wall into the grounds: Dumbledore was undoing the enchantments he himself had set around the castle so they could enter at speed. The Dark Mark was glittering directly above the Astronomy Tower, the highest of the castle. Did that mean the death had occurred there?

Dumbledore had already crossed the crenellated ramparts and was dismounting; Harry landed next to him seconds later and looked around.

The ramparts were deserted. The door to the spiral staircase that led back into the castle was closed. There was no sign of a struggle, of a fight to the death, of a body.

"What does it mean?" Harry asked Dumbledore, looking up at the green skull with its serpent's tongue glinting evilly above them. "Is it the real Mark? Has someone definitely been — Professor?"

In the dim green glow from the Mark, Harry saw Dumbledore

clutching at his chest with his blackened hand.

“Go and wake Severus,” said Dumbledore faintly but clearly. “Tell him what has happened and bring him to me. Do nothing else, speak to nobody else, and do not remove your Cloak. I shall wait here.”

“But —”

“You swore to obey me, Harry — go!”

Harry hurried over to the door leading to the spiral staircase, but his hand had only just closed upon the iron ring of the door when he heard running footsteps on the other side. He looked around at Dumbledore, who gestured him to retreat. Harry backed away, drawing his wand as he did so.

The door burst open and somebody erupted through it and shouted, “*Expelliarmus!*”

Harry’s body became instantly rigid and immobile, and he felt himself fall back against the tower wall, propped like an unsteady statue, unable to move or speak. He could not understand how it had happened — *Expelliarmus* was not a Freezing Charm —

Then, by the light of the Mark, he saw Dumbledore’s wand flying in an arc over the edge of the ramparts and understood. . . . Dumbledore had wordlessly immobilized Harry, and the second he had taken to perform the spell had cost him the chance of defending himself.

Standing against the ramparts, very white in the face, Dumbledore still showed no sign of panic or distress. He merely looked across at his disarmer and said, “Good evening, Draco.”

Malfoy stepped forward, glancing around quickly to check that he

and Dumbledore were alone. His eyes fell upon the second broom.

“Who else is here?”

“A question I might ask you. Or are you acting alone?”

Harry saw Malfoy’s pale eyes shift back to Dumbledore in the greenish glare of the Mark.

“No,” he said. “I’ve got backup. There are Death Eaters here in your school tonight.”

“Well, well,” said Dumbledore, as though Malfoy was showing him an ambitious homework project. “Very good indeed. You found a way to let them in, did you?”

“Yeah,” said Malfoy, who was panting. “Right under your nose and you never realized!”

“Ingenious,” said Dumbledore. “Yet . . . forgive me . . . where are they now? You seem unsupported.”

“They met some of your guards. They’re having a fight down below. They won’t be long. . . . I came on ahead. I — I’ve got a job to do.”

“Well, then, you must get on and do it, my dear boy,” said Dumbledore softly.

There was silence. Harry stood imprisoned within his own invisible, paralyzed body, staring at the two of them, his ears straining to hear sounds of the Death Eaters’ distant fight, and in front of him, Draco Malfoy did nothing but stare at Albus Dumbledore, who, incredibly, smiled.

“Draco, Draco, you are not a killer.”

“How do you know?” said Malfoy at once.

He seemed to realize how childish the words had sounded; Harry

saw him flush in the Mark's greenish light.

"You don't know what I'm capable of," said Malfoy more forcefully. "You don't know what I've done!"

"Oh yes, I do," said Dumbledore mildly. "You almost killed Katie Bell and Ronald Weasley. You have been trying, with increasing desperation, to kill me all year. Forgive me, Draco, but they have been feeble attempts. . . . So feeble, to be honest, that I wonder whether your heart has been really in it."

"It has been in it!" said Malfoy vehemently. "I've been working on it all year, and tonight —"

Somewhere in the depths of the castle below Harry heard a muffled yell. Malfoy stiffened and glanced over his shoulder.

"Somebody is putting up a good fight," said Dumbledore conversationally. "But you were saying . . . yes, you have managed to introduce Death Eaters into my school, which, I admit, I thought impossible. . . . How did you do it?"

But Malfoy said nothing. He was still listening to whatever was happening below and seemed almost as paralyzed as Harry was.

"Perhaps you ought to get on with the job alone," suggested Dumbledore. "What if your backup has been thwarted by my guard? As you have perhaps realized, there are members of the Order of the Phoenix here tonight too. And after all, you don't really need help. . . . I have no wand at the moment. . . . I cannot defend myself."

Malfoy merely stared at him.

"I see," said Dumbledore kindly, when Malfoy neither moved nor spoke. "You are afraid to act until they join you."

"I'm not afraid!" snarled Malfoy, though he still made no move to

hurt Dumbledore. “It’s you who should be scared!”

“But why? I don’t think you will kill me, Draco. Killing is not nearly as easy as the innocent believe. . . . So tell me, while we wait for your friends . . . how did you smuggle them in here? It seems to have taken you a long time to work out how to do it.”

Malfoy looked as though he was fighting down the urge to shout, or to vomit. He gulped and took several deep breaths, glaring at Dumbledore, his wand pointing directly at the latter’s heart. Then, as though he could not help himself, he said, “I had to mend that broken Vanishing Cabinet that no one’s used for years. The one Montague got lost in last year.”

“Aaaah.” Dumbledore’s sigh was half a groan. He closed his eyes for a moment. “That was clever. . . . There is a pair, I take it?”

“In Borgin and Burkes,” said Malfoy, “and they make a kind of passage between them. Montague told me that when he was stuck in the Hogwarts one, he was trapped in limbo but sometimes he could hear what was going on at school, and sometimes what was going on in the shop, as if the cabinet was traveling between them, but he couldn’t make anyone hear him. . . . In the end, he managed to Apparate out, even though he’d never passed his test. He nearly died doing it. Everyone thought it was a really good story, but I was the only one who realized what it meant — even Borgin didn’t know — I was the one who realized there could be a way into Hogwarts through the cabinets if I fixed the broken one.”

“Very good,” murmured Dumbledore. “So the Death Eaters were able to pass from Borgin and Burkes into the school to help you. . . . A clever plan, a very clever plan . . . and, as you say, right under my

nose.”

“Yeah,” said Malfoy, who bizarrely seemed to draw courage and comfort from Dumbledore’s praise. “Yeah, it was!”

“But there were times,” Dumbledore went on, “weren’t there, when you were not sure you would succeed in mending the cabinet? And you resorted to crude and badly judged measures such as sending me a cursed necklace that was bound to reach the wrong hands . . . poisoning mead there was only the slightest chance I might drink. . . .”

“Yeah, well, you still didn’t realize who was behind that stuff, did you?” sneered Malfoy, as Dumbledore slid a little down the ramparts, the strength in his legs apparently fading, and Harry struggled fruitlessly, mutely, against the enchantment binding him.

“As a matter of fact, I did,” said Dumbledore. “I was sure it was you.”

“Why didn’t you stop me, then?” Malfoy demanded.

“I tried, Draco. Professor Snape has been keeping watch over you on my orders —”

“He hasn’t been doing *your* orders, he promised my mother —”

“Of course that is what he would tell you, Draco, but —”

“He’s a double agent, you stupid old man, he isn’t working for you, you just think he is!”

“We must agree to differ on that, Draco. It so happens that I trust Professor Snape —”

“Well, you’re losing your grip, then!” sneered Malfoy. “He’s been offering me plenty of help — wanting all the glory for himself — wanting a bit of the action — ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Did you do the

necklace, that was stupid, it could have blown everything —’ But I haven’t told him what I’ve been doing in the Room of Requirement, he’s going to wake up tomorrow and it’ll all be over and he won’t be the Dark Lord’s favorite anymore, he’ll be nothing compared to me, nothing!”

“Very gratifying,” said Dumbledore mildly. “We all like appreciation for our own hard work, of course. But you must have had an accomplice, all the same . . . someone in Hogsmeade, someone who was able to slip Katie the — the — aaaah . . .”

Dumbledore closed his eyes again and nodded, as though he was about to fall asleep. “. . . of course . . . Rosmerta. How long has she been under the Imperius Curse?”

“Got there at last, have you?” Malfoy taunted.

There was another yell from below, rather louder than the last. Malfoy looked nervously over his shoulder again, then back at Dumbledore, who went on: “So poor Rosmerta was forced to lurk in her own bathroom and pass that necklace to any Hogwarts student who entered the room unaccompanied? And the poisoned mead . . . well, naturally, Rosmerta was able to poison it for you before she sent the bottle to Slughorn, believing that it was to be my Christmas present. . . . Yes, very neat . . . very neat . . . Poor Mr. Filch would not, of course, think to check a bottle of Rosmerta’s. Tell me, how have you been communicating with Rosmerta? I thought we had all methods of communication in and out of the school monitored.”

“Enchanted coins,” said Malfoy, as though he was compelled to keep talking, though his wand hand was shaking badly. “I had one and she had the other and I could send her messages —”

“Isn’t that the secret method of communication the group that called themselves Dumbledore’s Army used last year?” asked Dumbledore. His voice was light and conversational, but Harry saw him slip an inch lower down the wall as he said it.

“Yeah, I got the idea from them,” said Malfoy, with a twisted smile. “I got the idea of poisoning the mead from the Mudblood Granger as well, I heard her talking in the library about Filch not recognizing potions.”

“Please do not use that offensive word in front of me,” said Dumbledore.

Malfoy gave a harsh laugh. “You care about me saying ‘Mudblood’ when I’m about to kill you?”

“Yes, I do,” said Dumbledore, and Harry saw his feet slide a little on the floor as he struggled to remain upright. “But as for being about to kill me, Draco, you have had several long minutes now, we are quite alone, I am more defenseless than you can have dreamed of finding me, and still you have not acted. . . .”

Malfoy’s mouth contorted involuntarily, as though he had tasted something very bitter.

“Now, about tonight,” Dumbledore went on, “I am a little puzzled about how it happened. . . . You knew that I had left the school? But of course,” he answered his own question, “Rosmerta saw me leaving, she tipped you off using your ingenious coins, I’m sure.”

“That’s right,” said Malfoy. “But she said you were just going for a drink, you’d be back. . . .”

“Well, I certainly did have a drink . . . and I came back . . . after a fashion,” mumbled Dumbledore. “So you decided to spring a trap for

me?”

“We decided to put the Dark Mark over the tower and get you to hurry up here, to see who’d been killed,” said Malfoy. “And it worked!”

“Well . . . yes and no . . .” said Dumbledore. “But am I to take it, then, that nobody has been murdered?”

“Someone’s dead,” said Malfoy, and his voice seemed to go up an octave as he said it. “One of your people . . . I don’t know who, it was dark. . . . I stepped over the body. . . . I was supposed to be waiting up here when you got back, only your Phoenix lot got in the way. . . .”

“Yes, they do that,” said Dumbledore.

There was a bang and shouts from below, louder than ever; it sounded as though people were fighting on the actual spiral staircase that led to where Dumbledore, Malfoy, and Harry stood, and Harry’s heart thundered unheard in his invisible chest. . . . Someone was dead. . . . Malfoy had stepped over the body . . . but who was it?

“There is little time, one way or another,” said Dumbledore. “So let us discuss your options, Draco.”

“*My* options!” said Malfoy loudly. “I’m standing here with a wand — I’m about to kill you —”

“My dear boy, let us have no more pretense about that. If you were going to kill me, you would have done it when you first disarmed me, you would not have stopped for this pleasant chat about ways and means.”

“I haven’t got any options!” said Malfoy, and he was suddenly white as Dumbledore. “I’ve got to do it! He’ll kill me! He’ll kill my

whole family!”

“I appreciate the difficulty of your position,” said Dumbledore. “Why else do you think I have not confronted you before now? Because I knew that you would have been murdered if Lord Voldemort realized that I suspected you.”

Malfoy winced at the sound of the name.

“I did not dare speak to you of the mission with which I knew you had been entrusted, in case he used Legilimency against you,” continued Dumbledore. “But now at last we can speak plainly to each other. . . . No harm has been done, you have hurt nobody, though you are very lucky that your unintentional victims survived. . . . I can help you, Draco.”

“No, you can’t,” said Malfoy, his wand hand shaking very badly indeed. “Nobody can. He told me to do it or he’ll kill me. I’ve got no choice.”

“Come over to the right side, Draco, and we can hide you more completely than you can possibly imagine. What is more, I can send members of the Order to your mother tonight to hide her likewise. Your father is safe at the moment in Azkaban. . . . When the time comes, we can protect him too. . . . Come over to the right side, Draco . . . you are not a killer. . . .”

Malfoy stared at Dumbledore.

“But I got this far, didn’t I?” he said slowly. “They thought I’d die in the attempt, but I’m here . . . and you’re in my power. . . . I’m the one with the wand. . . . You’re at my mercy. . . .”

“No, Draco,” said Dumbledore quietly. “It is my mercy, and not yours, that matters now.”

Malfoy did not speak. His mouth was open, his wand hand still trembling. Harry thought he saw it drop by a fraction —

But suddenly footsteps were thundering up the stairs, and a second later Malfoy was buffeted out of the way as four people in black robes burst through the door onto the ramparts. Still paralyzed, his eyes staring unblinkingly, Harry gazed in terror upon four strangers: It seemed the Death Eaters had won the fight below.

A lumpy-looking man with an odd lopsided leer gave a wheezy giggle.

“Dumbledore cornered!” he said, and he turned to a stocky little woman who looked as though she could be his sister and who was grinning eagerly. “Dumbledore wandless, Dumbledore alone! Well done, Draco, well done!”

“Good evening, Amycus,” said Dumbledore calmly, as though welcoming the man to a tea party. “And you’ve brought Alecto too. . . . Charming . . .”

The woman gave an angry little titter. “Think your little jokes’ll help you on your deathbed then?” she jeered.

“Jokes? No, no, these are manners,” replied Dumbledore.

“Do it,” said the stranger standing nearest to Harry, a big, rangy man with matted gray hair and whiskers, whose black Death Eater’s robes looked uncomfortably tight. He had a voice like none that Harry had ever heard: a rasping bark of a voice. Harry could smell a powerful mixture of dirt, sweat, and, unmistakably, blood coming from him. His filthy hands had long yellowish nails.

“Is that you, Fenrir?” asked Dumbledore.

“That’s right,” rasped the other. “Pleased to see me,

Dumbledore?”

“No, I cannot say that I am.”

Greyback grinned, showing pointed teeth. Blood trickled down his chin and he licked his lips slowly, obscenely.

“But you know how much I like kids, Dumbledore.”

“Am I to take it that you are attacking even without the full moon now? This is most unusual. . . . You have developed a taste for human flesh that cannot be satisfied once a month?”

“That’s right,” said Fenrir Greyback. “Shocks you that, does it, Dumbledore? Frightens you?”

“Well, I cannot pretend it does not disgust me a little,” said Dumbledore. “And, yes, I am a little shocked that Draco here invited you, of all people, into the school where his friends live. . . .”

“I didn’t,” breathed Malfoy. He was not looking at Fenrir; he did not seem to want to even glance at him. “I didn’t know he was going to come —”

“I wouldn’t want to miss a trip to Hogwarts, Dumbledore,” rasped Greyback. “Not when there are throats to be ripped out . . . Delicious, delicious . . .”

And he raised a yellow fingernail and picked at his front teeth, leering at Dumbledore. “I could do you for afters, Dumbledore.”

“No,” said the fourth Death Eater sharply. He had a heavy, brutal-looking face. “We’ve got orders. Draco’s got to do it. Now, Draco, and quickly.”

Malfoy was showing less resolution than ever. He looked terrified as he stared into Dumbledore’s face, which was even paler, and rather lower than usual, as he had slid so far down the rampart wall.

“He’s not long for this world anyway, if you ask me!” said the lopsided man, to the accompaniment of his sister’s wheezing giggles. “Look at him — what’s happened to you, then, Dumby?”

“Oh, weaker resistance, slower reflexes, Amycus,” said Dumbledore. “Old age, in short . . . One day, perhaps, it will happen to you . . . if you are lucky. . . .”

“What’s that mean, then, what’s that mean?” yelled the Death Eater, suddenly violent. “Always the same, weren’t yeh, Dumby, talking and doing nothing, nothing. I don’t even know why the Dark Lord’s bothering to kill yer! Come on, Draco, do it!”

But at that moment there were renewed sounds of scuffling from below and a voice shouted, “*They’ve blocked the stairs — Reducto! REDUCTO!*”

Harry’s heart leapt: So these four had not eliminated all opposition, but merely broken through the fight to the top of the tower, and, by the sound of it, created a barrier behind them —

“Now, Draco, quickly!” said the brutal-faced man angrily.

But Malfoy’s hand was shaking so badly that he could barely aim.

“I’ll do it,” snarled Fenrir, moving toward Dumbledore with his hands outstretched, his teeth bared.

“I said no!” shouted the brutal-faced man; there was a flash of light and the werewolf was blasted out of the way; he hit the ramparts and staggered, looking furious. Harry’s heart was hammering so hard it seemed impossible that nobody could hear him standing there, imprisoned by Dumbledore’s spell — if he could only move, he could aim a curse from under the Cloak —

“Draco, do it or stand aside so one of us —” screeched the

woman, but at that precise moment, the door to the ramparts burst open once more and there stood Snape, his wand clutched in his hand as his black eyes swept the scene, from Dumbledore slumped against the wall, to the four Death Eaters, including the enraged werewolf, and Malfoy.

“We’ve got a problem, Snape,” said the lumpy Amycus, whose eyes and wand were fixed alike upon Dumbledore, “the boy doesn’t seem able —”

But somebody else had spoken Snape’s name, quite softly.

“Severus . . .”

The sound frightened Harry beyond anything he had experienced all evening. For the first time, Dumbledore was pleading.

Snape said nothing, but walked forward and pushed Malfoy roughly out of the way. The three Death Eaters fell back without a word. Even the werewolf seemed cowed.

Snape gazed for a moment at Dumbledore, and there was revulsion and hatred etched in the harsh lines of his face.

“Severus . . . please . . .”

Snape raised his wand and pointed it directly at Dumbledore.

“Avada Kedavra!”

A jet of green light shot from the end of Snape’s wand and hit Dumbledore squarely in the chest. Harry’s scream of horror never left him; silent and unmoving, he was forced to watch as Dumbledore was blasted into the air. For a split second, he seemed to hang suspended beneath the shining skull, and then he fell slowly backward, like a great rag doll, over the battlements and out of sight.

Weerlig Tref die Toring

Terug onder die sterrelug trek Harry Dumbledore tot bo-op die naaste rotsklip en dan op sy voete. Papnat en bewend, met Dumbledore se gewig nog steeds op hom, konsentreer Harry harder as wat hy nog ooit gedoen het op sy destinasie: Hogsmeade. Hy maak sy oë toe, hou Dumbledore se arm so styf moontlik vas, en betree daardie gevoel van aaklige samepersing.

Hy weet dit het gewerk nog voor hy sy oë oopmaak: Die sout-reuk en die seebries is weg. Hy en Dumbledore staan bibberend en druppelend in die middel van Hogsmeade se donker hoofstraat. Vir een skrikwekkende oomblik verbeel Harry hom daar kom nóg Inferi om die winkels se hoeke na hom toe aangesluis, maar hy knip sy oë en sien niks roer nie; alles is doodstil en pikdonker, behalwe 'n paar straatlampe en ligte in party van die boonste vensters.

“Ons het dit reggekry, professor!” fluister Harry met moeite; hy word skielik bewus van 'n skerp brandpyn in sy borskas. “Ons het dit reggekry! Ons het die Horcrux!”

Dumbledore steier teen hom. Harry dink eers sy onervare Apparering het Dumbledore van balans af gegooi, maar dan sien hy Dumbledore se gesig is bleker en klammer as ooit in die straatlamp se dowwe lig.

“Is professor oukei?”

“Ek het al beter gevoel,” sê Dumbledore swak, maar sy mond-hoeke krul effens op. “Daardie towerdrankie ... was allesbehalwe 'n gesondheidsdrankie ...”

En tot Harry se skok sak Dumbledore op die grond neer.

“Professor – dis oukei, professor; u gaan oukei wees, moenie bekommerd wees nie –”

Hy kyk desperaat rond vir hulp, maar sien niemand nie en al waaraan hy kan dink, is dat hy Dumbledore so gou moontlik by die siekeboeg moet kry.

“Ons moet professor op skool toe vat ... Madame Pomfrey ...”

“Nee,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek het ... professor Snape nodig ... maar ek dink nie ... ek kan al so ver loop nie ...”

“Reg – professor, luister – ek gaan aan ’n deur klop, ’n plek kry waar u kan bly – dan sal ek hardloop en vir Madame –”

“Severus,” sê Dumbledore met nadruk. “Ek het vir Severus nodig ...”

“Goed dan, Snape – maar ek sal professor vir ’n rukkie moet los sodat ek –”

Maar voor Harry kan wegbeweeg, hoor hy iemand nader hardloop. Sy hart bokspring: iemand het hulle gesien, iemand weet hulle het hulp nodig – hy kyk om en sien Madame Rosmerta met die donker straat op hoëhak-donspantoffels na hulle toe aankom; sy het ’n syjapon aan waarop daar drake geborduur is.

“Ek het julle sien Appareer toe ek my gordyne toetrek! Dankie tog, dankie tog, ek kon nie dink wat om te doen nie – maar wat’s verkeerd met Albus?”

Sy kom hygend tot stilstand en staar met groot oë na Dumbledore.

“Hy’s beseer,” sê Harry. “Madame Rosmerta, kan hy in die Drie Besemstokke wag terwyl ek op skool toe hardloop om vir hom hulp te kry?”

“Jy kan nie alleen soontoe gaan nie! Besef jy nie – het jy nie gesien – ?”

“As u my help om hom te stut,” sê Harry, wat nie na haar luister nie, “dink ek ons sal hom daar kan inkry –”

“Wat het gebeur?” vra Dumbledore. “Rosmerta, wat is fout?”

“Die – die Donker Merk, Albus.”

En sy beduie op in die lug, in Hogwarts se rigting. Harry word met vrees vervul toe hy daardie woorde hoor ... hy draai om en kyk.

Daar is dit; dit hang in die lug bokant die skool: die gloeiende groen skedel met die slangtong, die merk wat die Doodseters agterlaat wanneer hulle ’n gebou betree het ... wanneer hulle moord gepleeg het ...

“Wanneer het dit verskyn?” vra Dumbledore en sy hand klou pynlik aan Harry se skouer terwyl hy sukkel om op die been te kom.

“Moet ’n paar minute gelede wees; dit was nie daar toe ek die kat laat uitgaan het nie, maar toe ek bo kom –”

“Ons moet onmiddellik terug kasteel toe gaan,” sê Dumbledore. “Rosmerta,” en al is hy ietwat onvas op sy voete lyk hy absoluut in beheer van die situasie, “ons het vervoer nodig – besems –”

“Ek het twee agter in die kroeg,” sê sy en lyk baie benoud. “Sal ek hardloop en hulle gaan haal – ?”

“Nee, Harry kan dit doen.”

Harry lig dadelik sy towerstaf.

"Accio Rosmerta se besems."

'n Sekonde later hoor hulle 'n harde slag soos wat die kroeg se voordeur oopbars; twee besems skiet uit tot in die straat en jaag resies met mekaar tot by Harry, waar hulle trillend op heuphoogte tot stilstand kom.

"Rosmerta, stuur asseblief vir die Ministerie 'n boodskap," sê Dumbledore terwyl hy op die besem naaste aan hom klim. "Dalk het niemand binne Hogwarts nog besef daar is fout nie ... Harry, trek jou Onsigbaarheidsmantel aan."

Harry haal die Mantel uit sy sak en gooi dit oor hom voor hy op sy besem klim; Madame Rosmerta trippel al klaar terug na haar kroeg toe Harry en Dumbledore stewig op die grond vasskop en in die lug opstyg. Terwyl hulle kasteel toe jaag, hou Harry Dumbledore langs hom dop, gereed om hom te gryp as hy sou val, maar dit lyk of die Donker Merk soos 'n stimulant op Dumbledore inwerk: Hy sit vooroor gebuig op sy besem met sy oë vasgenaël op die Merk, sy lang silwer hare en baard wapper agter hom aan in die naglug. Dan kyk Harry ook na die skedel voor hulle en vrees swel soos 'n giftige borrel in hom op, druk sy longe inmekaar en verdryf alle ander gedagtes uit sy kop ...

Hoe lank was hulle weg? Het Ron, Hermione en Ginny se geluk nou al gedraai? Is dit oor een van hulle dat die Merk bokant die skool hang, of is dit oor Neville of Luna of 'n ander lid van die DS? En sê nou dit is een van hulle ... Harry is die een wat hulle aangesê het om die gange te patroleer, hy het hulle gevra om die veiligheid van hulle beddens te verlaat ... Gaan hy weer vir 'n vriend se dood verantwoordelik wees?

Terwyl hulle oor die donker laning vlieg waarlangs hulle vroeër gestap het, hoor Harry bo die gefluit van die naglug in sy ore hoe Dumbledore weer in een of ander vreemde taal prewel. Hy dink hy verstaan hoekom toe hy sy besem vir 'n oomblik voel ruk toe hulle oor die grensmuur by die skoolgrond invlieg: Dumbledore maak die beskermende paljasse wat hy om die kasteel opgestel het tot niet sodat hulle vinnig daar kan inkom. Die Donker Merk glinster direk bo die Sterrekundetoring, die hoogste een in die kasteel. Beteken dit iemand is daar doodgemaak?

Dumbledore het die getande bolwerk reeds oorgesteek en klim van sy besem af; Harry land sekondes later langs hom en kyk rond.

Die bokant van die toring is verlate. Die deur na die spiraaltrap wat terug na die kasteel lei, is toe. Daar is geen tekens van 'n worsteling of 'n geveg tot die dood of 'n liggaam nie.

“Wat beteken dit?” vra Harry vir Dumbledore terwyl hy opkyk na die groen skedel met sy slangtong wat boos bo hulle glinster. “Is dit die regte Merk? Is iemand definitief – professor?”

In die dowwe groen gloed van die Merk sien Harry hoe Dumbledore se swart hand na sy borskas gryp.

“Gaan maak Severus wakker,” sê Dumbledore flou maar duidelik. “Sê vir hom wat gebeur het en bring hom na my toe. Moet niks anders doen nie, moet met niemand anders praat nie en moenie jou Mantel afhaal nie. Ek wag hier.”

“Maar –”

“Jy het gesweer jy sal my gehoorsaam, Harry – gaan nou! –”

Harry beweeg haastig na die deur wat na die spiraaltrap lei, maar toe sy hand aan die deur se ysterring raak, hoor hy hardlopende voetstappe aan die ander kant. Hy kyk om na Dumbledore, wat vir hom beduie om terug te staan. Harry gee pad en hou sy towerstaf gereed.

Die deur bars oop en iemand storm uit en skree: “*Expelliarmus!*”

Harry se liggaam word oombliklik stokstyf en roerloos; hy voel hoe hy teen die Toring se muur terugval, regop gestut soos ’n wankelrige standbeeld, nie in staat om te beweeg of te praat nie. Hy kan nie verstaan hoe dit gebeur het nie – *Expelliarmus* is nie ’n Vriespreuk nie –

En toe, in die lig van die Merk, sien hy Dumbledore se towerstaf in ’n boog om die rand van die bolwerk vlieg en verstaan ... Dumbledore het Harry woordeloos versteen en in die sekonde wat hy dit gedoen het, kon hy homself nie verdedig nie.

Dumbledore staan met sy rug teen die muur en is spierwit in die gesig, maar hy toon geen teken van paniek of ontsteltenis nie. Hy kyk die een wat hom Ontwapen het net doodgewoon aan en sê: “Goeienaand, Draco.”

Malfoy tree vorentoe en kyk vinnig rond om seker te maak hy en Dumbledore is alleen. Sy oë val op die tweede besem.

“Wie is nog hier?”

“Dis ’n vraag wat ek vir jou moet vra. Of werk jy op jou eie?”

Harry sien hoe draai Malfoy se bleek oë terug na Dumbledore daar in die Merk se groen skynsel.

“Nee,” sê hy. “Ek het helpers. Daar is vanaand Doodseters hier in jou skool.”

“Wel, wel,” sê Dumbledore asof Malfoy vir hom ’n ambisieuse huiswerkprojek wys. “Knap gedaan. Jy het ’n manier gevind om hulle hier in te kry?”

“Ja,” sê Malfoy en hyg. “Reg onder jou neus – en jy’t dit nie eens agtergekom nie!”

“Vernuftig,” sê Dumbledore. “Maar ... vergewe my ... waar is hulle nou? Jy is dan alleen.”

“Hulle het van jou wagte raakgeloop. Hulle baklei nou hier onder. Maar hulle sal nie lank vat nie ... Ek het solank vooruit gekom. Ek – ek het ’n taak om af te handel.”

“Nou ja, dan moet jy dit doen en klaarkry, my liewe seun,” sê Dumbledore sag.

Daar is ’n doodse stilte. Harry is binne sy eie onsigbare, verlamde liggaam vasgevang; hy staar na die twee van hulle en spits sy ore om die vegtende Doodseters ver op die agtergrond te hoor. Draco Malfoy doen niks nie; hy staar net na Dumbledore, wat tot Harry se verstomming glimlag.

“Draco, Draco, jy is nie ’n moordenaar nie.”

“Hoe weet jy?” sê Malfoy dadelik.

Dit lyk of hy agterkom hoe kinderagtig die woorde geklink het, want Harry sien hom bloos in die Merk se groen lig.

“Jy weet nie waartoe ek in staat is nie,” sê Malfoy meer vurig, “jy weet nie wat ek gedoen het nie!”

“O ja, ek weet,” sê Dumbledore sag. “Jy het Katie Bell en Ronald Weasley amper doodgemaak. Jy het vanjaar met toenemende desperaatheid probeer om my dood te maak. Vergewe my, Draco, maar dit was flou pogings ... só flou, om eerlik te wees, dat ek wonder of jy regtig die hart daarvoor het ...”

“Natuurlik het ek!” sê Malfoy heftig. “Ek werk al heeljaar daaraan en vanaand –”

Iewers uit die dieptes van die kasteel hoor Harry ’n gedempte gil. Malfoy verstyf en kyk vinnig oor sy skouer.

“Iemand gee die stryd nie maklik gewonne nie,” sê Dumbledore onderhoudend. “Maar jy was besig om te sê ... Ja, jy hét dit reggekry om Doodseters by my skool te laat inkom en ek moet erken, ek het gedink dis onmoontlik ... Hoe het jy dit gedoen?”

Maar Malfoy sê niks; hy luister na wat ook al onder hulle gebeur en lyk amper net so verlam soos Harry.

“Miskien moet jy jou taak op jou eie aandurf,” stel Dumbledore voor. “Sê nou my wagte het jou helpers uitoorlê? Soos jy miskien agtergekom het, is die Orde van die Feniks se lede ook vanaand hier. En per slot van rekening het jy nie regtig hulp nodig nie ... Ek het nie eens op die oomblik ’n towerstaf nie ... Ek kan myself nie verdedig nie.”

Malfoy staar hom net aan.

“Ek sien,” sê Dumbledore vriendelik toe Malfoy nie beweeg of praat nie. “Jy is bang om tot aksie oor te gaan voor hulle by jou aansluit.”

“Ek is nie bang nie!” snou Malfoy hom toe, hoewel hy nog steeds niks doen om Dumbledore seer te maak nie. “Jy’s die een wat moet bang wees!”

“Hoekom? Ek dink nie jy sal my doodmaak nie, Draco. Om moord te pleeg is nie naastenby so maklik soos wat onskuldige mense dink nie ... So sê my, terwyl ons vir jou vriende wag ... hoe het jy hulle hier ingesmokkel? Dit het jou taamlik lank geneem om uit te werk hoe om dit te doen.”

Dit lyk of Malfoy veg teen die drang om te skree of op te gooi. Hy sluk swaar en haal ’n paar keer diep asem terwyl hy Dumbledore aangluur en sy towerstaf op die Skoolhoof se hart gerig hou. En toe, asof hy homself nie kan keer nie, sê hy: “Ek moes daardie Verdwyn-kabinet wat niemand jare lank gebruik het nie, regmaak. Die een waarin Montague laas jaar verdwaal het.

“Aaaa.”

Dumbledore se sug is half ’n kreun. Hy maak sy oë vir ’n oomblik toe.

“Dit was slim ... Daar is twee van hulle, nè?”

“Die ander een is in Borgin en Burkes,” sê Malfoy “en hulle maak ’n soort tunnel tussen die twee. Montague het my vertel hy’t in Hogwarts s’n vasgesit, hy was êrens in die middel van nêrens vasgevang, maar partykeer kon hy hoor wat in die skool aangaan en partykeer wat in die winkel gebeur, asof die Kabinet heen en weer tussen die twee plekke beweeg, maar niemand kon hom hoor nie ... Op die ou end het hy dit reggekry om daaruit te Appareer, selfs al het hy nog nie sy toets deurgekom nie. Hy’s amper dood toe hy dit gedoen het. Almal het gedink dis nogal ’n goeie storie, maar ek was al een wat besef het wat dit beteken – selfs Borgin het nie geweet nie – ek was die enigste een wat besef het ’n mens sal deur die Kabinette by Hogwarts kan inkom as ek die stukkende een kan regmaak.”

“Baie goed,” mompel Dumbledore. “So die Doodseters kon via Borgin en Burkes by die skool inkom om jou te help ... ’n slim plan, ’n baie slim plan ... en, soos jy sê, reg onder my neus ...”

“Ja,” sê Malfoy, wat blykbaar op ’n vreemde manier moed en vertroosting uit Dumbledore se lof put. “Ja, net so!”

“Maar daar was tye,” gaan Dumbledore aan, “dat jy nie seker was of jy die Kabinet sou kon regkry nie. En toe het jy jou tot primitiewe en swak beplande pogings gewend soos om vir my ’n vervloekte halssnoer te stuur wat noodwendig in die verkeerde hande sou beland ... en om heuningbier te vergiftig, al was daar net ’n skrale kans dat ek dit sou drink ...”

“Ja, wel, jy’t nog steeds nie agtergekom wie agter dit alles sit nie,” sê Malfoy met ’n grinnik terwyl Dumbledore effens teen die muur afgly omdat daar skaars meer krag in sy bene oor is en Harry tevergeefs en stom veg teen die towerspreuk wat hom vasgenael hou.

“Om die waarheid te sê, het ek,” sê Dumbledore. “Ek was seker dis jy.”

“Hoekom het jy my dan nie gekeer nie?” wil Malfoy weet.

“Ek het probeer, Draco. Professor Snape het jou op my bevel dopgehou –”

“Dit was nie op jou bevel nie; hy het my ma belowe –”

“Dis natuurlik wat hy vir jou vertel het, Draco, maar –”

“Hy’s ’n dubbelagent, jou simpel ou man; hy werk nie vir jou nie; jy dink net so!”

“Ek moet met jou verskil wat dit betref, Draco. Ek vertrou professor Snape –”

“Wel, dan is jy mal in jou kop!” sê Malfoy spottend. “Hy bied aanhoudend aan om my te help – wil al die glorie vir homself hê – ’n bietjie van die aksie hê – ‘Wat vang jy aan? Die halssnoer was ’n dom idee; dit kon alles weggegee het –’ Maar ek het nie vir hom vertel wat ek in die Vertrek van Vereistes gedoen het nie, so hy gaan môre wakker word en dan is dit alles verby en hy sal nie meer die Donker Heer se gunsteling wees nie; hy sal niks in vergelyking met my wees nie, niks!”

“Baie bevredigend,” sê Dumbledore rustig. “Ons almal hou natuurlik daarvan om erkenning vir ons harde werk te kry ... maar jy moes nogtans ’n medepligtige gehad het ... iemand in Hogsmeade, iemand wat vir Katie die – die – aaaaa ...”

Dumbledore maak sy oë weer toe en sy kop knik asof hy aan die slaap wil raak.

“... Natuurlik ... Rosmerta. Hoe lank is sy al onder die Imperiusvloek?”

“Jy’t uiteindelik bygekom,” sê Malfoy spottend.

Hulle hoor nog ’n gil van onder af, taamlik harder as die vorige een. Malfoy kyk weer gespanne oor sy skouer en dan terug na Dumbledore, wat aangaan: “So arme Rosmerta moes noodgedwonge in haar eie kleedkamer wag en daardie halssnoer vir enige Hogwarts-student gee wat alleen daar inkom? En die vergiftigde heuningbier ... wel, Rosmerta het natuurlik vir jou die gif daarin gegooi voor sy die bottel vir Slughorn gestuur het, want jy’t gedink dit gaan my Kers-present wees ... Ja, baie netjies ... baie netjies ... arme meneer Filch sou ’n bottel wat van Rosmerta af kom natuurlik nie nagaan nie ...

Sê my, hoe het jy met Rosmerta gekommunikeer? Ek dog ons het alle kommunikasiemetodes na en van die skool gemonitor.”

“Towermunte,” sê Malfoy asof hy genoodsaak is om aan te hou praat, al bewe die hand waarin sy towerstaf is erg. “Ek het een gehad en sy die ander een, en ek kon vir haar boodskappe stuur –”

“Is dit nie die geheime kommunikasiemiddel wat die groep wat hulself Dumbledore se Soldate noem verlede jaar gebruik het nie?” vra Dumbledore. Sy stem is lig en geselserig, maar Harry sien hy glip ’n entjie verder by die muur af terwyl hy dit sê.

“Ja, ek het die idee by hulle gekry,” sê Malfoy met ’n skewe glimlag. “En ek het die idee om die heuningbier te vergiftig by daai Modderbloed, Granger, gekry. Ek het haar in die biblioteek hoor praat van Filch wat te dom is om towerdrankies te herken ...”

“Moet asseblief nie daardie beledigende woord voor my gebruik nie,” sê Dumbledore.

Malfoy lag kras.

“Jy gee om dat ek ‘Modderbloed’ voor jou sê terwyl ek op die punt is om jou dood te maak?”

“Ja, ek gee om,” sê Dumbledore en Harry sien sy voet gly effens op die vloer soos wat hy regop probeer bly. “Maar wat betref jy wat op die punt is om my dood te maak, Draco – daar is nou al ’n hele paar minute verby. Ons is stoksielalleen. Ek is weerloser as wat jy ooit kon droom om my aan te tref, en jy het nog steeds niks gedoen nie ...”

Malfoy se mond vertrek onwillekeurig asof hy iets baie bitters geproe het.

“En nou, oor vanaand,” gaan Dumbledore aan, “ek verstaan nie mooi hoe dit gebeur het nie ... Hoe het jy geweet ek is weg by die skool? Maar natuurlik,” antwoord hy sy eie vraag, “Rosmerta het my gesien en toe het sy jou ongetwyfeld deur middel van julle vinding-ryke munte laat weet ...”

“Dis reg,” sê Malfoy. “Maar sy het gesê jy gaan net iets drink, dan kom jy terug ...”

“Wel, ek het voorwaar iets gaan drink ... en ek het teruggekom ... op ’n manier,” mompel Dumbledore. “So toe het julle besluit om vir my ’n strik te stel?”

“Ons het besluit om die Donker Merk oor die Toring te laat hang sodat jy vinnig moes terugkom om te sien wie doodgemaak is,” sê Malfoy. “En dit het gewerk!”

“Wel ... ja en nee ...” sê Dumbledore. “Maar wil jy dan vir my sê niemand is vermoor nie?”

“Iemand is dood,” sê Malfoy en sy stem styg ’n oktaaf toe hy

dit sê. "Een van jou mense ... Ek weet nie wie nie; dit was donker ... Ek het oor die liggaam getree ... Ek was veronderstel om hier bo te wag tot jy terugkom, maar jou Feniks-spul was in die pad ..."

"Ja, dis hulle manier," sê Dumbledore.

Daar is 'n slag en gille onder hulle, die hardste nóg; dit klink of mense besig is om te veg op die einste spiraaltrap wat lei tot bo waar Dumbledore, Malfoy en Harry is. Harry se hart trommel onhoorbaar in sy onsigbare borskas ... iemand is dood ... Malfoy het oor die liggaam getree ... maar wie is dit?

"Die tyd is min, wat jy ook al besluit om te doen," sê Dumbledore. "So kom ons bespreek jou opsies, Draco."

"My opsies!" sê Malfoy hard. "Ek staan hier met 'n towerstaf – ek's op die punt om jou dood te maak –"

"My liewe seun, hou op om voor te gee jy gaan dit doen. As jy my wou doodgemaak het, sou jy dit gedoen het sodra jy my Ontwapen het, jy sou nie eers hierdie aangename geselsie oor hoe en wanneer wat gebeur het met my gehad het nie."

"Ek het nie enige opsies nie!" sê Malfoy en hy is skielik net so bleek soos Dumbledore. "Ek moet dit doen! Hy sal my doodmaak! Hy sal my hele familie doodmaak!"

"Ek besef jy verkeer in 'n benarde posisie," sê Dumbledore. "Hoekom anders dink jy het ek jou nie vroeër al gekonfronteer nie? Omdat ek geweet het dit sal jou dood beteken as die Heer Voldemort moet besef ek verdink jou."

Malfoy deins terug by die noem van die naam.

"Ek kon dit nie waag om met jou te praat oor die sending waarop ek geweet het jy gestuur is nie, ingeval hy Legilimensie teen jou sou gebruik," gaan Dumbledore voort. "Maar nou kan ons ten minste reguit met mekaar praat ... Daar is geen skade aangerig nie; jy het niemand seergemaak nie, hoewel jy baie gelukkig is dat jou onbedoelde slagoffers oorleef het ... Ek kan jou help, Draco."

"Nee, jy kan nie," sê Malfoy en sy towerstaf bewe nou baie erg in sy hand. "Niemand kan nie. Hy't gesê ek moet dit doen of hy gaan my doodmaak. Ek het nie 'n keuse nie."

"Kom oor na die regte kant toe, Draco. Ons kan jou beter wegsteek as wat jy jou ooit kan voorstel. En wat meer is, ek kan vanaand nog lede van die Orde na jou ma toe stuur om haar op 'n soortgelyke manier te versteek. Jou pa is op die oomblik veilig in Azkaban ... maar wanneer die tyd kom, kan ons hom ook beskerm ... Kom oor na die regte kant toe, Draco ... Jy is nie 'n moordenaar nie ..."

Malfoy staar Dumbledore aan.

“Maar ek het tot hier gekom, het ek nie?” sê hy stadig. “Hulle het gedink ek sal in die proses doodgaan, maar ek is hier ... en jy is in my mag Ek is die een met die towerstaf ... Jy's aan my genade oorgelewer ...”

“Nee, Draco,” sê Dumbledore sag. “Dit is my genade, en nie joune nie, wat nou saak maak.”

Malfoy praat nie. Sy mond is oop en sy hand met die towerstaf bewee nog steeds. Harry verbeel hom Malfoy laat dit effens sak –

Maar skielik kom daar donderende voetstappe met die trap op en 'n sekonde later word Malfoy uit die pad gestamp toe vier mense in swart mantels by die deur uitbars en uitgehardloop kom. Nog steeds verlam en met oë wat staar sonder om te knip, kyk Harry vreesbevange na die vier vreemdelinge: Dit lyk of die Doodeters die geveg daar onder gewen het.

'n Homp van 'n man met 'n skewe, sluwe gesig giggel aam-borstig.

“Dumbledore in 'n hoek vas!” sê hy en draai na 'n kort, gesette vrou, wat lyk of sy sy suster kan wees en gretig grynslag. “Dumbledore sonder 'n towerstaf, Dumbledore alleen! Mooi so, Draco, knap gedaan!”

“Goeienaand, Amycus,” sê Dumbledore kalm asof hy die man by 'n teepartytjie verwelkom. “En jy het Alecto ook saamgebring ... sjarmant ...”

Die vrou gryns kwaai.

“Dink jy jou grappies gaan jou help hier op jou sterfbed?” vra sy spottend.

“Grappies? Nee, nee, dis net goeie maniere,” antwoord Dumbledore.

“Doen dit,” sê die vreemdeling wat naaste aan Harry staan: 'n lang, skraal man met gekoekte grys hare en wangbaarde wie se swart Doodseterkleed ongemaklik styf aan hom sit. Hy het 'n stem wat klink soos niks wat Harry nog ooit gehoor het nie: 'n krakerige blaf. Die man ruik na 'n sterk mengsel van vullis, sweet en, onmiskenbaar, bloed. Sy vieslike vuil hande het lang geel naels.

“Is dit jy, Fenrir?” vra Dumbledore.

“Dis reg,” sê die kraakstem. “Bly om my te sien, Dumbledore?”

“Nee, ek kan nie sê ek is nie ...”

Fenrir Greyback grinnik en wys sy gepunte tande. Daar drup bloed by sy ken af en hy lek stadig en obseer oor sy lippe.

“Maar jy weet hoe baie ek van kinders hou, Dumbledore.”

“Moet ek hieruit aflei dat jy nou selfs wanneer dit nie volmaan is nie mense aanval? Dit is uiters ongewoon ... Jy het 'n voorliefde vir

menslike vleis ontwikkel wat nie meer net een keer 'n maand bevredig kan word nie?"

"Dis reg," sê Greyback. "Dit skok jou, nè, Dumbledore? Dit maak jou bang."

"Wel, ek kan nie voorgee dit walg my nie ietwat nie," sê Dumbledore. "En ja, ek is effens geskok dat Draco jou van alle mense uitgenooi het na die skool waar sy vriende woon ..."

"Ek het nie," fluister Malfoy. Hy kyk nie na Greyback nie; hy loer nie eens vlugtig na hom nie. "Ek het nie geweet hy gaan kom nie –"

"Ek wou nie 'n uitstappie Hogwarts toe misloop nie, Dumbledore," sê Greyback krakerig. "Nie as daar kele is wat oopgeskeur kan word nie ... heerlik, heerlik ..."

En hy lig 'n geel vingernael en krap aan sy voortande terwyl hy Dumbledore boosaardig aangluur.

"Jy kan my nagereg wees, Dumbledore ..."

"Nee," sê die vierde Doodseter skerp. Hy het 'n swaar, wrede gesig. "Ons het bevele. Draco moet dit doen. Nou, Draco, en vinnig."

Malfoy lyk minder gereed as ooit tevore. Hy staar angsbevange na Dumbledore se gesig, wat nou selfs nóg bleker is en taamliek laer as gewoonlik, want hy het nog verder teen die muur afgesak.

"As jy my vra, is hy in elk geval klaar met die wêreld," sê die man met die skewe gesig terwyl sy suster kortasem giggel. "Kyk na hom – wat het met jou gebeur, Dumby?"

"O, minder weerstand, stadiger refleksie, Amycus," sê Dumbledore. "Kortom, die ouderdom ... Eendag sal dit dalk met jou ook gebeur ... as jy gelukkig is ..."

"Wat bedoel jy daarmee, hè, wat bedoel jy daarmee?" gil die Doodseter skielik woedend. "Altyd dieselfde, nè, Dumby, praat en doen niks, net mooi niks nie. Ek weet nie hoekom die Donker Heer eers die moeite doen om jou dood te maak nie. Komaan, Draco, doen dit!"

Maar op daardie oomblik is daar opnuut geluide van 'n geworstel iewers onder en 'n stem skree: "*Hulle't die trap versper – Reducto! REDUCTO!*"

Harry se hart begin wild klop: So hierdie vier het nie al die opposisie uitgeskakel nie; hulle het net van die bakleiery af weggekom en tot hier bo-op die Toring gevorder en – so klink dit – 'n versperring agter hulle geskep.

"Nou, Draco, gou!" sê die man met die wrede gesig kwaai.

Maar Malfoy se hand bewe só erg dat hy skaars kan mik.

"Ek sal dit doen," grom Greyback en stap op Dumbledore af met sy hande uitgestrek en sy tande ontbloot.

“Ek het gesê nee!” skree die man met die wrede gesig; daar is ’n ligflits en die weerwolf word uit die pad geblaas; hy tref die muur, steier en lyk woedend. Harry se hart hamer só dat dit onmoontlik voel dat niemand kan hoor hy staan daar nie, vasgevang deur Dumbledore se towerspreuk – as hy net kan beweeg, kan hy ’n vloek van onder die Mantel uit op hulle afstuur –

“Draco, doen dit, of staan opsy sodat een van ons –” skree die vrou, maar op daardie presiese oomblik bars die deur weer oop en daar staan Snape: Sy towerstaf is in sy hand en sy swart oë swiep oor die toneel, van Dumbledore wat teen die muur inmekaar gesak het na die vier Doodseters, insluitende die ontstoke weerwolf, en Malfoy.

“Ons het ’n probleem, Snape,” sê die logge Amycus terwyl sy oë en towerstaf op Dumbledore gerig bly. “Die seun kry dit blykbaar nie reg –”

Maar dan sê iemand anders Snape se naam, baie sag.

“Severus ...”

Die klank maak Harry banger as enigiets wat hy die hele aand al ervaar het. Vir die eerste keer pleit Dumbledore.

Snape sê niks, maar loop vorentoe en stoot Malfoy ru uit die pad. Die drie Doodseters retireer woordeloos. Selfs die weerwolf lyk bang.

Snape kyk Dumbledore vir ’n oomblik aan en daar is walging en haat op sy gesig se harde lyne afgeëts.

“Severus ... asseblief ...”

Snape lig sy towerstaf en rig dit direk op Dumbledore.

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

’n Groen ligstraal skiet uit Snape se towerstaf en tref Dumbledore vol teen die bors. Harry se gil van afgryse verlaat hom nie; stil en roerloos word hy gedwing om toe te kyk hoe Dumbledore in die lug op gegooi word: Vir ’n breukdeel van ’n sekonde lyk dit of hy onder die blink skedel in die lug hang en dan val hy stadig en soos ’n groot strooipop agter die toringmuur af en verdwyn.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



FLIGHT OF THE PRINCE

Harry felt as though he too were hurtling through space; *it had not happened. . . . It could not have happened. . . .*

“Out of here, quickly,” said Snape.

He seized Malfoy by the scruff of the neck and forced him through the door ahead of the rest; Greyback and the squat brother and sister followed, the latter both panting excitedly. As they vanished through the door, Harry realized he could move again. What was now holding him paralyzed against the wall was not magic, but horror and shock. He threw the Invisibility Cloak aside as the brutal-faced Death Eater, last to leave the tower top, was disappearing through the door.

“Petrificus Totalus!”

The Death Eater buckled as though hit in the back with something solid and fell to the ground, rigid as a waxwork, but he had barely hit the floor when Harry was clambering over him and running down the darkened staircase.

Terror tore at Harry’s heart. . . . He had to get to Dumbledore and he had to catch Snape. . . . Somehow the two things were linked. . . . He could reverse what had happened if he had them both together. . . . Dumbledore could not have died. . . .

He leapt the last ten steps of the spiral staircase and stopped where he landed, his wand raised: The dimly lit corridor was full of dust; half the ceiling seemed to have fallen in; and a battle was raging before him, but even as he attempted to make out who was fighting whom, he heard the hated voice shout, *“It’s over, time to go!”* and saw Snape disappearing around the corner at the far end of the corridor; he and Malfoy seemed to have forced their way through the fight unscathed. As Harry plunged after them, one of the fighters detached themselves from the fray and flew at him: It was the werewolf, Fenrir. He was on top of Harry before Harry could raise his wand: Harry fell backward, with filthy matted hair in his face, the stench of sweat and blood filling his nose and mouth, hot greedy breath at his throat —

“Petrificus Totalus!”

Harry felt Fenrir collapse against him; with a stupendous effort he pushed the werewolf off and onto the floor as a jet of green light came flying toward him; he ducked and ran, headfirst, into the fight. His feet met something squashy and slippery on the floor and he

stumbled: There were two bodies lying there, lying facedown in a pool of blood, but there was no time to investigate. Harry now saw red hair flying like flames in front of him: Ginny was locked in combat with the lumpy Death Eater, Amycus, who was throwing hex after hex at her while she dodged them: Amycus was giggling, enjoying the sport: “*Crucio — Crucio —* you can’t dance forever, pretty —”

“*Impedimenta!*” yelled Harry.

His jinx hit Amycus in the chest: He gave a piglike squeal of pain, was lifted off his feet and slammed into the opposite wall, slid down it, and fell out of sight behind Ron, Professor McGonagall, and Lupin, each of whom was battling a separate Death Eater. Beyond them, Harry saw Tonks fighting an enormous blond wizard who was sending curses flying in all directions, so that they ricocheted off the walls around them, cracking stone, shattering the nearest window —

“Harry, where did you come from?” Ginny cried, but there was no time to answer her. He put his head down and sprinted forward, narrowly avoiding a blast that erupted over his head, showering them all in bits of wall. Snape must not escape, he must catch up with Snape —

“Take *that!*” shouted Professor McGonagall, and Harry glimpsed the female Death Eater, Alecko, sprinting away down the corridor with her arms over her head, her brother right behind her. He launched himself after them but his foot caught on something, and next moment he was lying across someone’s legs. Looking around, he saw Neville’s pale, round face flat against the floor.

“Neville, are you — ?”

“M’all right,” muttered Neville, who was clutching his stomach, “Harry . . . Snape ’n’ Malfoy . . . ran past . . .”

“I know, I’m on it!” said Harry, aiming a hex from the floor at the enormous blond Death Eater who was causing most of the chaos. The man gave a howl of pain as the spell hit him in the face: He wheeled around, staggered, and then pounded away after the brother and sister. Harry scrambled up from the floor and began to sprint along the corridor, ignoring the bangs issuing from behind him, the yells of the others to come back, and the mute call of the figures on the ground whose fate he did not yet know. . . .

He skidded around the corner, his trainers slippery with blood; Snape had an immense head start. Was it possible that he had already entered the cabinet in the Room of Requirement, or had the Order made steps to secure it, to prevent the Death Eaters retreating that way? He could hear nothing but his own pounding feet, his own hammering heart as he sprinted along the next empty corridor, but then spotted a bloody footprint that showed at least one of the fleeing Death Eaters was heading toward the front doors — perhaps the Room of Requirement was indeed blocked —

He skidded around another corner and a curse flew past him; he dived behind a suit of armor that exploded. He saw the brother and sister running down the marble staircase ahead and aimed jinxes at them, but merely hit several bewigged witches in a portrait on the landing, who ran screeching into neighboring paintings. As he leapt the wreckage of armor, Harry heard more shouts and screams; other people within the castle seemed to have awoken. . . .

He pelted toward a shortcut, hoping to overtake the brother and

sister and close in on Snape and Malfoy, who must surely have reached the grounds by now. Remembering to leap the vanishing step halfway down the concealed staircase, he burst through a tapestry at the bottom and out into a corridor where a number of bewildered and pajama-clad Hufflepuffs stood.

“Harry! We heard a noise, and someone said something about the Dark Mark —” began Ernie Macmillan.

“Out of the way!” yelled Harry, knocking two boys aside as he sprinted toward the landing and down the remainder of the marble staircase. The oak front doors had been blasted open, there were smears of blood on the flagstones, and several terrified students stood huddled against the walls, one or two still cowering with their arms over their faces. The giant Gryffindor hourglass had been hit by a curse, and the rubies within were still falling, with a loud rattle, onto the flagstones below.

Harry flew across the entrance hall and out into the dark grounds: He could just make out three figures racing across the lawn, heading for the gates beyond which they could Disapparate — by the looks of them, the huge blond Death Eater and, some way ahead of him, Snape and Malfoy . . .

The cold night air ripped at Harry’s lungs as he tore after them; he saw a flash of light in the distance that momentarily silhouetted his quarry. He did not know what it was but continued to run, not yet near enough to get a good aim with a curse —

Another flash, shouts, retaliatory jets of light, and Harry understood: Hagrid had emerged from his cabin and was trying to stop the Death Eaters escaping, and though every breath seemed to

shred his lungs and the stitch in his chest was like fire, Harry sped up as an unbidden voice in his head said: *not Hagrid . . . not Hagrid too . . .*

Something caught Harry hard in the small of the back and he fell forward, his face smacking the ground, blood pouring out of both nostrils: He knew, even as he rolled over, his wand ready, that the brother and sister he had overtaken using his shortcut were closing in behind him. . . .

“Impedimenta!” he yelled as he rolled over again, crouching close to the dark ground, and miraculously his jinx hit one of them, who stumbled and fell, tripping up the other; Harry leapt to his feet and sprinted on after Snape.

And now he saw the vast outline of Hagrid, illuminated by the light of the crescent moon revealed suddenly behind clouds; the blond Death Eater was aiming curse after curse at the gamekeeper; but Hagrid’s immense strength and the toughened skin he had inherited from his giantess mother seemed to be protecting him. Snape and Malfoy, however, were still running; they would soon be beyond the gates, able to Disapparate —

Harry tore past Hagrid and his opponent, took aim at Snape’s back, and yelled, *“Stupefy!”*

He missed; the jet of red light soared past Snape’s head; Snape shouted, *“Run, Draco!”* and turned. Twenty yards apart, he and Harry looked at each other before raising their wands simultaneously.

“Cruc — ”

But Snape parried the curse, knocking Harry backward off his feet before he could complete it; Harry rolled over and scrambled back

up again as the huge Death Eater behind him yelled, “*Incendio!*” Harry heard an explosive bang and a dancing orange light spilled over all of them: Hagrid’s house was on fire.

“Fang’s in there, yer evil — !” Hagrid bellowed.

“*Cruc —*” yelled Harry for the second time, aiming for the figure ahead illuminated in the dancing firelight, but Snape blocked the spell again. Harry could see him sneering.

“No Unforgivable Curses from you, Potter!” he shouted over the rushing of the flames, Hagrid’s yells, and the wild yelping of the trapped Fang. “You haven’t got the nerve or the ability —”

“*Incarc —*” Harry roared, but Snape deflected the spell with an almost lazy flick of his arm.

“Fight back!” Harry screamed at him. “Fight back, you cowardly —”

“Coward, did you call me, Potter?” shouted Snape. “Your father would never attack me unless it was four on one, what would you call him, I wonder?”

“*Stupe —*”

“Blocked again and again and again until you learn to keep your mouth shut and your mind closed, Potter!” sneered Snape, deflecting the curse once more. “Now *come!*” he shouted at the huge Death Eater behind Harry. “It is time to be gone, before the Ministry turns up —”

“*Impedi —*”

But before he could finish this jinx, excruciating pain hit Harry; he keeled over in the grass. Someone was screaming, he would surely die of this agony, Snape was going to torture him to death or madness

“No!” roared Snape’s voice and the pain stopped as suddenly as it had started; Harry lay curled on the dark grass, clutching his wand and panting; somewhere overhead Snape was shouting, “Have you forgotten our orders? Potter belongs to the Dark Lord — we are to leave him! Go! Go!”

And Harry felt the ground shudder under his face as the brother and sister and the enormous Death Eater obeyed, running toward the gates. Harry uttered an inarticulate yell of rage: In that instant, he cared not whether he lived or died. Pushing himself to his feet again, he staggered blindly toward Snape, the man he now hated as much as he hated Voldemort himself —

“Sectum — !”

Snape flicked his wand and the curse was repelled yet again; but Harry was mere feet away now and he could see Snape’s face clearly at last: He was no longer sneering or jeering; the blazing flames showed a face full of rage. Mustering all his powers of concentration, Harry thought, *Levi* —

“No, Potter!” screamed Snape. There was a loud BANG and Harry was soaring backward, hitting the ground hard again, and this time his wand flew out of his hand. He could hear Hagrid yelling and Fang howling as Snape closed in and looked down on him where he lay, wandless and defenseless as Dumbledore had been. Snape’s pale face, illuminated by the flaming cabin, was suffused with hatred just as it had been before he had cursed Dumbledore.

“You dare use my own spells against me, Potter? It was I who invented them — I, the Half-Blood Prince! And you’d turn my

inventions on me, like your filthy father, would you? I don't think so . . . *no!*”

Harry had dived for his wand; Snape shot a hex at it and it flew feet away into the darkness and out of sight.

“Kill me then,” panted Harry, who felt no fear at all, but only rage and contempt. “Kill me like you killed him, you coward —”

“DON'T —” screamed Snape, and his face was suddenly demented, inhuman, as though he was in as much pain as the yelping, howling dog stuck in the burning house behind them — “CALL ME COWARD!”

And he slashed at the air: Harry felt a white-hot, whiplike something hit him across the face and was slammed backward into the ground. Spots of light burst in front of his eyes and for a moment all the breath seemed to have gone from his body, then he heard a rush of wings above him and something enormous obscured the stars. Buckbeak had flown at Snape, who staggered backward as the razor-sharp claws slashed at him. As Harry raised himself into a sitting position, his head still swimming from its last contact with the ground, he saw Snape running as hard as he could, the enormous beast flapping behind him and screeching as Harry had never heard him screech —

Harry struggled to his feet, looking around groggily for his wand, hoping to give chase again, but even as his fingers fumbled in the grass, discarding twigs, he knew it would be too late, and sure enough, by the time he had located his wand, he turned only to see the hippogriff circling the gates. Snape had managed to Disapparate just beyond the school's boundaries.

“Hagrid,” muttered Harry, still dazed, looking around. “HAGRID?”

He stumbled toward the burning house as an enormous figure emerged from out of the flames carrying Fang on his back. With a cry of thankfulness, Harry sank to his knees; he was shaking in every limb, his body ached all over, and his breath came in painful stabs.

“Yeh all righ’, Harry? Yeh all righ’? Speak ter me, Harry. . . .”

Hagrid’s huge, hairy face was swimming above Harry, blocking out the stars. Harry could smell burnt wood and dog hair; he put out a hand and felt Fang’s reassuringly warm and alive body quivering beside him.

“I’m all right,” panted Harry. “Are you?”

“‘Course I am . . . take more’n that ter finish me.”

Hagrid put his hands under Harry’s arms and raised him up with such force that Harry’s feet momentarily left the ground before Hagrid set him upright again. He could see blood trickling down Hagrid’s cheek from a deep cut under one eye, which was swelling rapidly.

“We should put out your house,” said Harry, “the charm’s ‘Aguamenti’ . . .”

“Knew it was summat like that,” mumbled Hagrid, and he raised a smoldering pink, flowery umbrella and said, “*Aguamenti!*”

A jet of water flew out of the umbrella tip. Harry raised his wand arm, which felt like lead, and murmured “*Aguamenti*” too: Together, he and Hagrid poured water on the house until the last flame was extinguished.

“S’not too bad,” said Hagrid hopefully a few minutes later,

looking at the smoking wreck. “Nothin’ Dumbledore won’ be able to put righ’ . . .”

Harry felt a searing pain in his stomach at the sound of the name. In the silence and the stillness, horror rose inside him.

“Hagrid . . .”

“I was bindin’ up a couple o’ bowtruckle legs when I heard ’em comin’,” said Hagrid sadly, still staring at his wrecked cabin. “They’ll’ve bin burnt ter twigs, poor little things. . . .”

“Hagrid . . .”

“But what happened, Harry? I jus’ saw them Death Eaters runnin’ down from the castle, but what the ruddy hell was Snape doin’ with ’em? Where’s he gone — was he chasin’ them?”

“He . . .” Harry cleared his throat; it was dry from panic and the smoke. “Hagrid, he killed . . .”

“Killed?” said Hagrid loudly, staring down at Harry. “Snape killed? What’re yeh on abou’, Harry?”

“Dumbledore,” said Harry. “Snape killed . . . Dumbledore.”

Hagrid simply looked at him, the little of his face that could be seen completely blank, uncomprehending.

“Dumbledore wha’, Harry?”

“He’s dead. Snape killed him . . .”

“Don’ say that,” said Hagrid roughly. “Snape kill Dumbledore — don’ be stupid, Harry. Wha’s made yeh say tha’?”

“I saw it happen.”

“Yeh couldn’ have.”

“I saw it, Hagrid.”

Hagrid shook his head; his expression was disbelieving but sympathetic, and Harry knew that Hagrid thought he had sustained a blow to the head, that he was confused, perhaps by the aftereffects of a jinx. . . .

“What musta happened was, Dumbledore musta told Snape ter go with them Death Eaters,” Hagrid said confidently. “I suppose he’s gotta keep his cover. Look, let’s get yeh back up ter the school. Come on, Harry. . . .”

Harry did not attempt to argue or explain. He was still shaking uncontrollably. Hagrid would find out soon enough, too soon. . . . As they directed their steps back toward the castle, Harry saw that many of its windows were lit now. He could imagine, clearly, the scenes inside as people moved from room to room, telling each other that Death Eaters had got in, that the Mark was shining over Hogwarts, that somebody must have been killed. . . .

The oak front doors stood open ahead of them, light flooding out onto the drive and the lawn. Slowly, uncertainly, dressing-gowned people were creeping down the steps, looking around nervously for some sign of the Death Eaters who had fled into the night. Harry’s eyes, however, were fixed upon the ground at the foot of the tallest tower. He imagined that he could see a black, huddled mass lying in the grass there, though he was really too far away to see anything of the sort. Even as he stared wordlessly at the place where he thought Dumbledore’s body must lie, however, he saw people beginning to move toward it.

“What’re they all lookin’ at?” said Hagrid, as he and Harry approached the castle front, Fang keeping as close as he could to

their ankles. “Wha’s tha’, lyin’ on the grass?” Hagrid added sharply, heading now toward the foot of the Astronomy Tower, where a small crowd was congregating. “See it, Harry? Righ’ at the foot o’ the tower? Under where the Mark . . . Blimey . . . yeh don’ think someone got thrown — ?”

Hagrid fell silent, the thought apparently too horrible to express aloud. Harry walked alongside him, feeling the aches and pains in his face and his legs where the various hexes of the last half hour had hit him, though in an oddly detached way, as though somebody near him was suffering them. What was real and inescapable was the awful pressing feeling in his chest. . . .

He and Hagrid moved, dreamlike, through the murmuring crowd to the very front, where the dumbstruck students and teachers had left a gap.

Harry heard Hagrid’s moan of pain and shock, but he did not stop; he walked slowly forward until he reached the place where Dumbledore lay and crouched down beside him. He had known there was no hope from the moment that the full Body-Bind Curse Dumbledore had placed upon him lifted, known that it could have happened only because its caster was dead, but there was still no preparation for seeing him here, spread-eagled, broken: the greatest wizard Harry had ever, or would ever, meet.

Dumbledore’s eyes were closed; but for the strange angle of his arms and legs, he might have been sleeping. Harry reached out, straightened the half-moon spectacles upon the crooked nose, and wiped a trickle of blood from the mouth with his own sleeve. Then he gazed down at the wise old face and tried to absorb the enormous

and incomprehensible truth: that never again would Dumbledore speak to him, never again could he help. . . .

The crowd murmured behind Harry. After what seemed like a long time, he became aware that he was kneeling upon something hard and looked down.

The locket they had managed to steal so many hours before had fallen out of Dumbledore's pocket. It had opened, perhaps due to the force with which it hit the ground. And although he could not feel more shock or horror or sadness than he felt already, Harry knew, as he picked it up, that there was something wrong. . . .

He turned the locket over in his hands. This was neither as large as the locket he remembered seeing in the Pensieve, nor were there any markings upon it, no sign of the ornate *S* that was supposed to be Slytherin's mark. Moreover, there was nothing inside but for a scrap of folded parchment wedged tightly into the place where a portrait should have been.

Automatically, without really thinking about what he was doing, Harry pulled out the fragment of parchment, opened it, and read by the light of the many wands that had now been lit behind him:

To the Dark Lord

I know I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more.

R.A.B.

Harry neither knew nor cared what the message meant. Only one thing mattered: This was not a Horcrux. Dumbledore had weakened himself by drinking that terrible potion for nothing. Harry crumpled the parchment in his hand, and his eyes burned with tears as behind him Fang began to howl.

Die Prins Slaan op die Vlug

Dit voel vir Harry of hy ook ondertoe neerstort. *Dit het nie gebeur nie ... dit kon nie gebeur het nie ...*

“Ons moet padgee, gou,” sê Snape.

Hy kry Malfoy agter die nek beet en dwing hom voor die ander by die deur in; Greyback volg en dan die lywige broer en suster, wat albei hyg van opwinding. Toe hulle binnetoe verdwyn, besef Harry hy kan weer beweeg; dit wat hom nou teen die muur versteen hou, is nie towerkrag nie, maar afgryse en skok. Hy gooi die Onsigbaarheidsmantel van hom af net voor die wreedgesig Doodseter laaste by die Toring se deur kan inglip.

“*Petrificus Totalus!*”

Die Doodseter steek vas asof iets hards hom in die rug getref het en slaan op die grond neer, styf soos 'n wasbeeld, maar hy het die vloer skaars getref of Harry spring oor hom en hardloop by die donker trap af.

Harry is vreesbevange ... hy moet by Dumbledore uitkom en hy moet Snape vang ... op een of ander manier hou die twee dinge verband met mekaar ... hy kan dit wat gebeur het, ongedaan maak as hy hulle by mekaar kan uitkry ... Dumbledore kan nie dood wees nie ...

Hy spring by die laaste tien trappe af en stop waar hy land met sy towerstaf in die lug: die dofverligte gang is vol stof; die helfte van die plafon het ingeval en daar woed 'n hewige geveg voor hom, maar terwyl hy nog probeer uitmaak wie teen wie veg, hoor hy die gehate stem skree: “*Dis verby! Tyd om pad te gee!*” en hy sien hoe Snape om die hoek aan die verste kant van die gang verdwyn; dit lyk of hy en Malfoy hul pad ongedeerd deur die bakleiery gebaan het. Harry sit hulle agterna, maar een van die vegters breek weg van die ander en storm op hom af: Dit is die weerwolf Greyback. Voor Harry sy towerstaf kan lig, is die weerwolf op hom: Harry val agteroor met die vieslike, gekoekte hare in sy gesig, die stank van sweet en bloed vul sy neus en mond en hy hoor 'n gulsige gehyg by sy keel –

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Harry voel hoe Greyback teen hom verstyf; met geweldige inspanning stoot hy die weerwolf van hom af en tot op die vloer terwyl daar 'n straal groen lig na hom toe aangevlieg kom; hy koes en hardloop kop eerste tussen die vegtende mense in. Sy voete gly op iets sags en glibberigs en hy struikel; daar lê twee liggame met hul gesigte na onder in 'n plas bloed, maar hy het nie tyd om ondersoek in te stel nie. Harry sien rooi hare soos vlamme voor hom rondswaai: Ginny is betrokke in 'n geveg teen die logge Doodseter, Amycus, wat die een towerspreuk na die ander op haar afstuur terwyl sy hulle ontwyk. Amycus giggel en geniet die speletjie: "*Crucio – Crucio –* jy kan nie vir ewig ronddans nie, mooi ding –"

"Impedimenta!" gil Harry.

Sy spreuk tref Amycus teen die bors: Hy skree soos 'n maer vark van pyn, word van sy voete af opgelig en teen die oorkantse muur vasgesmyt; hy gly af en verdwyn uit sig agter Ron, professor McGonagall en Lupin, wat elkeen teen 'n ander Doodseter veg. 'n Ent verder sien Harry hoe baklei Tonks teen 'n enorme blonde towenaar wat vloeke in alle rigtings laat vlieg sodat hulle van die mure om hulle terugspring, klip laat kraak en die naaste venster aan skerwe laat spat –

"Harry, waar kom jy nou vandaan?" roep Ginny, maar daar is nie tyd om haar te antwoord nie. Hy laat sak sy kop en nael vorentoe, ontduik rakelings iets wat bo sy kop ontplof en stukkies muur oor hulle laat neerreën: Snape mag nie ontsnap nie; hy moet Snape inhaal –

"Vat so!" skree professor McGonagall en Harry sien uit die hoek van sy oog hoe die vroulike Doodseter, Alecto, vervaard met die gang af hardloop, arms bo haar kop en haar broer reg agter haar. Harry sit hulle agterna, maar sy voet haak aan iets en die volgende oomblik lê hy op iemand se bene: hy kyk om en sien Neville se bleek, ronde gesig plat op die grond.

"Neville, is jy – ?"

"'s oukei," prewel Neville, wat sy maag vashou. "Harry ... Snape en Malfoy ... is hier verby ..."

"Ek weet; ek's op hulle spoor!" sê Harry en mik 'n paljas van die vloer af na die enorme blonde Doodseter wat die meeste van die chaos veroorsaak: Die man gil van pyn toe hy in die gesig getref word, swaai om, steier en laat vat dan agter die broer en suster aan.

Harry skarrel van die vloer af op en begin met die gang af hardloop. Hy ignoreer die harde slae agter hom, die ander wat vir hom gil om terug te kom, die dowwe geroep van die figure op die grond wie se lot nog onbekend is ...

Hy kom glyend om die hoek; sy tekkies is glad van die bloed; Snape het 'n geweldige voorsprong – is hy dalk reeds in by die Kabinet in die Vertrek van Vereistes, of het die Orde iets gedoen om dit te beveilig, om te keer dat die Doodseters daarlangs kan wegkom? Al wat hy hoor, is sy eie daverende voete en sy eie hamerende hart terwyl hy met die volgende leë gang af hardloop, maar dan sien hy 'n bebloede voetspoor wat wys dat minstens een van die vlugtende Doodseters voordeur toe mik – miskien is die Vertrek van Vereistes wel versper –

Hy kom glyend om nóg 'n hoek en 'n vloek vlieg verby hom; hy duik in agter 'n wapenrusting wat ontplof; hy sien die Doodseterbroer en -suster voor met die marmertrap af hardloop en mik paljasse na hulle, maar tref net 'n portret wat in die trapportaal hang en die hekse met die pruike daarin vlug vervaard na naburige portrette toe. Toe hy oor die verwoeste wapenrusting spring, hoor Harry nóg 'n gegil en geskree: ander mense in die kasteel moes ook wakker geword het ...

Hy pyl af op 'n kortpad in die hoop dat hy die broer en suster kan verbystek en Snape en Malfoy kan inhaal, want hulle moet beslis nou al iewers buite op die skoolgrond wees. Harry onthou van die verdwynende treetjie halfpad met die versteekte trappe af; hy spring daaroor en bars deur 'n tapisserie aan die onderkant. Hy beland in 'n gang waar daar 'n groepie verwilderde Hoesenproesers in hulle pajamas staan.

“Harry! Ons het 'n geraas gehoor en iemand het iets gesê van die Donker Merk –” begin Ernie Macmillan.

“Uit my pad!” gil Harry. Hy stamp twee seuns opsy en nael na die trapportaal en met die oorblyfsels van die marmertrap af onder toe. Die eikehoutvoordeure staan wyd oop; daar is bloedpasse op die klipsteëls en verskeie angsbevange studente staan teen die mure saamgebondel; een of twee nog met hulle arms oor hul gesigte; Gryffindor se reuse-uurglas is deur 'n vloek getref en die robyne daarin val nog steeds met 'n harde gekletter op die teëls ...

Harry skiet deur die Ingangsportaal en uit tot op die donker skoolgrond: hy kan net-net sien hoe drie figure oor die grasperk weghardloop; hy weet hulle wil anderkant die hekke kom sodat hulle kan Disappareer – dit lyk soos die yslike blonde Doodseter en, 'n entjie voor hom, Snape en Malfoy ...

Die koue naglug brand Harry se longe terwyl hy hulle op volle vaart agternasit; hy sien 'n ligflits in die verte wat die drie voortvlugtiges teen die donker afets; hy weet nie wat dit is nie, maar hou aan hardloop, want hy is nog nie naby genoeg om 'n goedgeмикte paljas te kan afvuur nie –

Daar is nog 'n ligflits, uitroepe, ligflitse van iemand wat terugveg, en Harry verstaan skielik: Hagrid het by sy hut uitgekóm en probeer keer dat die Doodseters ontsnap. Dit voel of elke asemteug sy longe stukkend skeur en sy bors brand soos vuur, maar Harry versnel, want 'n ongevraagde stem in sy kop sê: *nie Hagrid nie ... nie Hagrid ook nie ...*

Iets tref Harry hard op sy kruis en hy val vorentoe, vol op sy gesig; bloed stroom by albei sy neusgate uit: terwyl hy omrol met sy towerstaf gereed, weet hy die broer en suster wat hy verbygesteek het deur kortpad te vat, is besig om hom in te haal ...

"Impedimenta!" gil hy, rol weer om en lê so plat as moontlik op die donker grond. Wonder bo wonder tref sy paljas een van hulle, wat struikel en val en die ander een pootjie; Harry spring orent en hardloop verder agter Snape aan ...

En nou sien hy Hagrid se yslike silhoeët in die lig van die sekelmaan wat skielik agter die wolke uitkom; die blonde Doodseter mik vloek op vloek na die boswagter, maar Hagrid se ontsaglike krag en die sterk vel wat hy by sy reusma geërf het, beskerm hom blykbaar; Snape en Malfoy hardloop egter nog steeds en hulle gaan binnekort by die hekke uit wees en dan kan hulle Disappareer –

Harry storm verby Hagrid en sy opponent, mik na Snape se rug en gil: *"Bedwelm!"*

Dis mis; die rooi ligstraal vlieg verby Snape se kop; Snape gil: *"Hardloop, Draco!"* en draai om; twintig tree uit mekaar kyk hy en Harry vir mekaar voor hulle hul towerstawwe tegelyk lig.

"Cruc–"

Maar Snape weer die vloek af deur Harry se voete onder hom uit te slaan voor hy die woord kan voltooi; Harry rol om en kom weer regop toe die reuse-Doodseter agter hom *"Incendio!"* skree; Harry hoor 'n harde ontploffing en 'n oranje lig dans flikkerend oor hulle almal: Hagrid se huis is aan die brand.

"Tande is daar binne, jou bouse – !" bulder Hagrid.

'Cruc–' gil Harry vir die tweede keer en mik na die figuur wat in die vuur se lig afgeëts is, maar Snape keer die vloek weer. Harry kan sien hoe hy grinnik.

"Geen Onvergeeflike Vloeke vir jou nie, Potter!" skree hy bo-oor die knetterende vlamme, Hagrid se gille en die vasgekeerde Tande se wilde getjank. "Jy het nie die moed of die vermoë –"

"Incarc–" brul Harry, maar Snape keer die towerspreuk met 'n lui armbeweging weg.

"Baklei terug!" skree Harry vir hom. "Baklei terug, jou lafaard –"

“Noem jy my ’n lafaard, Potter?” roep Snape uit. “Jou pa het dit nooit gewaag om my aan te val tensy hulle vier teen een was nie. So ek wonder wat jy hom sal noem?”

“*Stupe*–”

“Weer afgeweer, en weer, en weer, en weer, tot jy leer om jou mond te hou en jou gedagtes af te sluit, Potter!” sis Snape smalend terwyl hy die vloek weer eens wegkeer. “Kom nou!” skree hy vir die reuse-Doodseter agter Harry. “Dis tyd om pad te gee, voor die Ministerie hier opdaag –”

“*Impedi*–”

Maar voor hy hierdie towerspreuk kan voltooi, tref ’n ondraaglike pyn Harry; hy val op die gras neer, iemand gil, hy gaan doodgaan van hierdie pyn, Snape gaan hom martel tot hy dood of mal is –

“Nee!” brul Snape se stem en die pyn stop so vinnig as wat dit gekom het; Harry lê opgekrul op die donker gras, hy klou sy towerstaf vas en hyg. Iewers bokant hom skree Snape: “Het jy jou bevele vergeet? Potter behoort aan die Donker Heer – ons moet hom uitlos! Hardloop! Hardloop!”

En Harry voel hoe skud die grond onder sy gesig soos wat die broer en suster en die enorme Doodseter gehoorsaam na die hekke toe afsit. Harry uiter ’n ongeartikuleerde gil van woede: op hierdie oomblik gee hy nie om of hy lewe of doodgaan nie; hy kom weer sukkelend op die been, steier blindelings na Snape, die man wat hy nou soveel haat soos wat hy Voldemort self haat –

“*Sectum*–”

Snape swaai sy towerstaf en die vloek word weer eens afgeweer, maar Harry is nou baie naby en hy kan Snape se gesig uiteindelik duidelik sien: Hy grinnik en gryns nie meer nie; die vlamme gloed wys ’n gesig vol woede. Harry konsentreer vir al wat hy werd is en dink: “*Levi*–”

“Nee, Potter!” skree Snape. Daar is ’n harde SLAG en Harry skiet agteruit, tref die grond weer hard en hierdie keer vlieg sy towerstaf uit sy hand. Hy hoor Hagrid gil en Tande tjank terwyl Snape nader kom en op hom afkyk waar hy lê, sonder sy towerstaf en so weerloos soos wat Dumbledore was. Snape se bleek gesig word verlig deur die brandende hut en is vervul met haat, net soos voor hy Dumbledore vervloek het.

“Hoe durf jy my eie towerspreuke teen my gebruik, Potter? Dit was ek wat hulle uitgedink het – ek, die Halfbloed Prins! En jy dink jy kan my eie uitvindings teen my gebruik, nes jou vieslike pa? Ek dink nie so nie ... *nee!*”

Harry duik vir sy towerstaf; Snape stuur 'n paljas daarop af en dit vlieg 'n paar tree verder die donkerte in en verdwyn.

“Maak my dan dood,” hyg Harry, wat geen vrees voel nie, net woede en veragting. “Maak my dood soos jy hom doodgemaak het, jou lafaard –”

“MOENIE –” skree Snape en sy gesig lyk skielik waansinnig en onmenslik, asof hy in net soveel pyn verkeer as die paniekerige, tjankende hond wat in die brandende hut agter hulle vasgekeer is, “– MY 'N LAFAARD NOEM NIE!”

En hy kap in die lug: Harry voel hoe iets witwarms hom soos 'n sweep deur die gesig slaan en val weer terug op die grond. Ligkolle ontplof voor sy oë en vir 'n oomblik is dit asof daar niks meer asem in sy lyf is nie, dan hoor hy die geruis van vlerke bo hom en iets ysliks beweeg voor die sterre in: Bokbok vlieg af op Snape, wat terugsteier toe die vlymskerp kloue na hom gryp. Harry se kop swem nog van die laaste hou teen die grond, maar hy kom op in 'n sittende posisie en sien hoe hardloop Snape vir al wat hy werd is; die enorme dierasie klap hard met sy vlerke en kryds soos wat Harry hom nog nooit gehoor kryds het nie –

Harry sukkel tot op sy bene, soek bedwelmd na sy towerstaf in die hoop dat hy Snape weer agterna kan sit, maar terwyl sy vingers naartiglik in die gras rondsoek, weet hy eintlik al dit is te laat. Teen die tyd dat hy sy towerstaf kry en omdraai, sien hy die Hippogrief in sirkels om die hekke vlieg: Snape het dit reggekry om net buitekant die skool se grense te Disappeare.

“Hagrid,” prewel Harry nog steeds deur die wind en kyk om. “HAGRID?”

Hy strompel na die brandende hut en dan kom daar 'n enorme figuur met Tande op sy rug uit die vlamme gestap. Met 'n gil van dankbaarheid sak Harry op sy knieë neer; elke enkele ledemaat van hom ruk en bewe, sy hele lyf pyn en elke asemteug gaan met 'n steekpyn gepaard.

“Jy orraait, Harry? Jy orraait? Praat met my, Harry ...”

Hagrid se reusagtige, harige gesig swem voor Harry en verdoesels die sterre. Harry ruik gebrande hout en hondehare; hy steek sy hand uit en voel Tande se lyf warm en gerusstellend bewe.

“Ek's oukei,” hyg Harry. “En jy?”

“Tuurlik is ek ... Vat meer as dit om met my klaar te speel.”

Hagrid steek sy hande onder Harry se arms in en tel hom met soveel krag op dat hy Harry se voete vir 'n oomblik van die grond af oplig voor hy hom weer neersit. Harry sien bloed teen Hagrid se

wang afloop; daar is 'n diep sny onder sy oog wat besig is om vinnig toe te swel.

"Ons moet die vuur blus," sê Harry. "Die towerspreuk is *Aguamenti* ..."

"Geweet dis iets van daai aard," mompel Hagrid. Hy lig sy smeulende pienk blommetjiesambreel en sê: "*Aguamenti!*"

'n Waterstraal spuit voor uit die sambreel. Harry lig sy arm met die towerstaf, al voel dit soos lood, en prewel ook "*Aguamenti*". Saam spuit hy en Hagrid water oor die hut tot die laaste vlam geblus is.

"Issie te erg nie," sê Hagrid 'n paar minute later hoopvol terwyl hy na die rokende puin kyk. "Niks wat Dumbledore nie kan regmaak ..."

Harry voel 'n brandpyn in sy maag toe hy die naam hoor. In die stilte en die stilheid stoot die afgryse in hom op.

"Hagrid ..."

"Ek was besig om 'n paar Takkruipers se bene te verbind toe ek hulle hoor aankom," sê Hagrid hartseer terwyl hy nog steeds na sy verwoeste huis staan en staar. "Hulle's seker nou net takkies as, die arme goed ..."

"Hagrid ..."

"Wat het gebeur, Harry? Ek het daai Doodseters by die kasteel sien uithardloop, maar wat de duiwel soek Snape by hulle? Waar-natoe is hy – het hy hulle agternagesit?"

"Hy ..." Harry maak sy keel skoon; dit is droog van paniek en die rook. "Hagrid, hy't iemand doodgemaak ..."

"Doodgemaak?" sê Hagrid hard en staar af na Harry. "Snape het iemand doodgemaak? Wat praat jy, Harry?"

"Dis Dumbledore," sê Harry. "Snape het ... Dumbledore doodgemaak."

Hagrid gaap hom net aan; die bietjie van sy gesig wat sigbaar is, is heeltemal uitdrukkingloos, begriploos.

"Dumbledore, wat, Harry?"

"Hy's dood. Snape het hom doodgemaak ..."

"Moenie sulke goed sê nie," sê Harry skor. "Snape het Dumbledore doodgemaak – moenie simpel wees nie, Harry. Wat laat jou so iets sê?"

"Ek het dit gesien gebeur."

"Onmoontlik."

"Ek het dit gesien, Hagrid."

Hagrid skud sy kop; sy uitdrukking is een van ongeloof en simpatie en Harry weet Hagrid dink hy het 'n harde hou teen die kop gekry en is nou deurmekaar, miskien van 'n paljas se nagevolge ...

“Wat moes gebeur het, is dat Dumbledore vir Snape gesê het om saam met daai Doodseters te gaan,” sê Hagrid seker van sy saak. “Hy moet seker spioen speel. Kom ek vat jou terug op skool toe. Komaan, Harry ...”

Harry probeer nie stry of verduidelik nie. Hy bewe nog steeds onbeheerbaar. Hagrid sal gou genoeg uitvind, té gou ... Wanneer hulle terug kasteel toe draai, sien Harry daar is nou lig in baie van die vensters; hy kan hom die tonele daar binne duidelik voorstel: mense wat van kamer na kamer hardloop, vir mekaar vertel die Doodseters het ingekom en die Donker Merk hang oor Hogwarts en iemand is doodgemaak ...

Die eikehoutvoordeure staan oop voor hulle; lig vloei uit tot buite op die oprit en die grasperk. Stadig en onseker kom mense in japonne by die trap af en kyk senuweeagtig rond vir tekens van die Doodseters wat die nag in gevlug het. Maar Harry se oë bly vasge-nael op die grond aan die voet van die hoogste toring. Hy verbeel hom hy sien ’n swart, lewelose hopie daar op die gras lê, al is hy eintlik te ver weg om hoegenaamd enigiets van die aard te kan sien. En terwyl hy woordeloos staar na die plek waar hy dink Dumbledore se liggaam moet lê, sien hy hoe mense soontoe begin beweeg.

“Waarna kyk hulle almal?” vra Hagrid terwyl hy en Harry die kasteel se voorkant nader met Tande wat so na moontlik aan hulle enkels probeer bly. “Wat’s dit wat daar op die gras lê?” vra Hagrid hard en kies nou ook koers na die voet van die Sterrekundetoring waar daar ’n groep mense saamdrom. “Sien jy dit, Harry? Daar aan die voet van die Toring? Reg onder die Merk ... dêmmit ... dink jy iemand is daar afge – ?”

Hagrid raak stil; die gedagte is blykbaar te verskriklik om hardop uit te spreek. Harry loop langs hom en voel die pyn en seer in sy gesig en bene waar soveel verskillende paljasse hom die afgelope halfuur getref het, maar dit is asof hy op ’n vreemde manier verwyderd daarvan is, asof iemand naby hom dit voel. Wat baie meer werklik en onontkombaar is, is die aaklige beklemming in sy bors ...

Hy en Hagrid beweeg soos in ’n droom deur die prewelende groep tot heel voor waar die dronkgeslaande studente en onderwysers ’n opening gelos het.

Harry hoor Hagrid se uitroep van pyn en skok, maar hy stop nie, hy loop stadig vorentoe totdat hy by die plek kom waar Dumbledore lê en dan hurk hy langs hom.

Van die oomblik dat Dumbledore se Vasvriesvloek op hom opgehef is, het Harry geweet daar is geen hoop meer nie; hy het geweet dit kon net gebeur het omdat die een wat die vloek uitgespreek het,

dood is; maar dit het hom nogtans nie daarop voorberei om hom só hier te sien lê nie: oopgespalk en gebroke, die grootste towenaar wat Harry nog ooit ontmoet het of sal ontmoet.

Dumbledore se oë is toe; was dit nie vir die vreemde manier waarop sy arms en bene gedraai is nie, kon dit lyk of hy net slaap. Harry steek sy hand uit, druk die halfmaanbril reg op die krom neus en vee 'n dun straaltjie bloed met sy eie mou van die mond af. Dan staar hy af na die wyse ou gesig en probeer om die enorme en onbegryplike waarheid in te neem: dat Dumbledore nooit weer met hom sal praat nie, hom nooit weer sal kan help nie ...

Die groep mense mompel agter Harry. Ná wat soos 'n baie lang tyd voel, kom hy agter dat hy op iets hards kniel en kyk af.

Die hangertjie wat hulle soveel ure gelede gesteel het, het uit Dumbledore se sak geval. Dit het oopgegaan, miskien as gevolg van die slag waarmee dit die grond getref het. En hoewel hy nie méér skok of afgryse of hartseer kan voel as wat hy reeds ervaar nie, weet Harry toe hy dit optel dat daar iets verkeerd is ...

Hy draai die hangertjie in sy hande om. Dit is nie so groot soos die een wat hy onthou hy in die Peinssif gesien het nie, en daar is ook nie enige merktekens op nie, geen teken van die swierige S wat veronderstel is om Slytherin se merk te wees nie. Wat meer is, daar is niks binne-in nie behalwe 'n stukkie opgevoude perkament wat styf ingedruk is op die plek waar 'n foto behoort te wees.

Outomaties, sonder om regtig te dink wat hy doen, trek Harry die stukkie perkament uit, vou dit oop en lees dit in die lig van die baie towerstawwe wat nou agter hom skyn:

Aan die Donker Heer

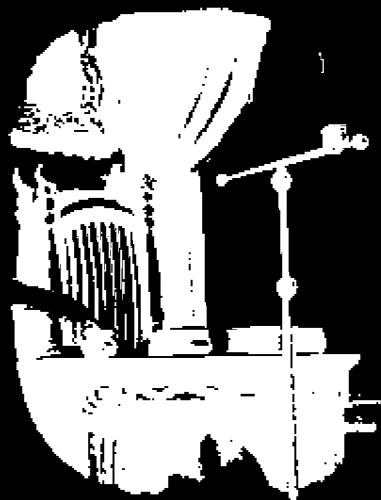
*Ek weet ek sal dood wees lank voordat u hierdie boodskap lees,
maar ek wil hê u moet weet dis ek wat u geheim ontdek het.*

*Ek het die regte Horcrux gesteel en gaan dit so gou moontlik vernietig.
Ek staar die dood in die oë in die hoop dat wanneer u u eweknie
ontmoet u weer eens sterflik sal wees.*

R.A.B.

Harry weet nie en gee ook nie om wat die boodskap beteken nie. Net een ding maak saak: dit is nie 'n Horcrux hierdie nie. Dumbledore het homself swakker gemaak deur verniet daardie verskriklike towerdrankie te drink. Harry frommel die perkament in sy hand op en sy oë brand van die trane terwyl Tande agter hom begin tjank.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



THE PHOENIX LAMENT

C'mere, Harry . . .”

“No.”

“Yeh can’ stay here, Harry. . . . Come on, now. . . .”

“No.”

He did not want to leave Dumbledore’s side, he did not want to move anywhere. Hagrid’s hand on his shoulder was trembling. Then another voice said, “Harry, come on.”

A much smaller and warmer hand had enclosed his and was pulling him upward. He obeyed its pressure without really thinking about it. Only as he walked blindly back through the crowd did he realize, from a trace of flowery scent on the air, that it was Ginny

who was leading him back into the castle. Incomprehensible voices battered him, sobs and shouts and wails stabbed the night, but Harry and Ginny walked on, back up the steps into the entrance hall. Faces swam on the edges of Harry's vision, people were peering at him, whispering, wondering, and Gryffindor rubies glistened on the floor like drops of blood as they made their way toward the marble staircase.

"We're going to the hospital wing," said Ginny.

"I'm not hurt," said Harry.

"It's McGonagall's orders," said Ginny. "Everyone's up there, Ron and Hermione and Lupin and everyone —"

Fear stirred in Harry's chest again: He had forgotten the inert figures he had left behind.

"Ginny, who else is dead?"

"Don't worry, none of us."

"But the Dark Mark — Malfoy said he stepped over a body —"

"He stepped over Bill, but it's all right, he's alive."

There was something in her voice, however, that Harry knew boded ill.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure . . . he's a — a bit of a mess, that's all. Greyback attacked him. Madam Pomfrey says he won't — won't look the same anymore. . . ."

Ginny's voice trembled a little.

"We don't really know what the aftereffects will be — I mean, Greyback being a werewolf, but not transformed at the time."

“But the others . . . There were other bodies on the ground. . . .”

“Neville and Professor Flitwick are both hurt, but Madam Pomfrey says they’ll be all right. And a Death Eater’s dead, he got hit by a Killing Curse that huge blond one was firing off everywhere — Harry, if we hadn’t had your Felix potion, I think we’d all have been killed, but everything seemed to just miss us —”

They had reached the hospital wing. Pushing open the doors, Harry saw Neville lying, apparently asleep, in a bed near the door. Ron, Hermione, Luna, Tonks, and Lupin were gathered around another bed near the far end of the ward. At the sound of the doors opening, they all looked up. Hermione ran to Harry and hugged him; Lupin moved forward too, looking anxious.

“Are you all right, Harry?”

“I’m fine. . . . How’s Bill?”

Nobody answered. Harry looked over Hermione’s shoulder and saw an unrecognizable face lying on Bill’s pillow, so badly slashed and ripped that he looked grotesque. Madam Pomfrey was dabbing at his wounds with some harsh-smelling green ointment. Harry remembered how Snape had mended Malfoy’s *Sectumsempra* wounds so easily with his wand.

“Can’t you fix them with a charm or something?” he asked the matron.

“No charm will work on these,” said Madam Pomfrey. “I’ve tried everything I know, but there is no cure for werewolf bites.”

“But he wasn’t bitten at the full moon,” said Ron, who was gazing down into his brother’s face as though he could somehow force him to mend just by staring. “Greyback hadn’t transformed, so surely Bill

won't be a — a real — ?”

He looked uncertainly at Lupin.

“No, I don't think that Bill will be a true werewolf,” said Lupin, “but that does not mean that there won't be some contamination. Those are cursed wounds. They are unlikely ever to heal fully, and — and Bill might have some wolfish characteristics from now on.”

“Dumbledore might know something that'd work, though,” Ron said. “Where is he? Bill fought those maniacs on Dumbledore's orders, Dumbledore owes him, he can't leave him in this state —”

“Ron — Dumbledore's dead,” said Ginny.

“No!” Lupin looked wildly from Ginny to Harry, as though hoping the latter might contradict her, but when Harry did not, Lupin collapsed into a chair beside Bill's bed, his hands over his face. Harry had never seen Lupin lose control before; he felt as though he was intruding upon something private, indecent. He turned away and caught Ron's eye instead, exchanging in silence a look that confirmed what Ginny had said.

“How did he die?” whispered Tonks. “How did it happen?”

“Snape killed him,” said Harry. “I was there, I saw it. We arrived back on the Astronomy Tower because that's where the Mark was. . . . Dumbledore was ill, he was weak, but I think he realized it was a trap when we heard footsteps running up the stairs. He immobilized me, I couldn't do anything, I was under the Invisibility Cloak — and then Malfoy came through the door and disarmed him —”

Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth and Ron groaned. Luna's mouth trembled.

“— more Death Eaters arrived — and then Snape — and Snape did it. The *Avada Kedavra*.” Harry couldn’t go on.

Madam Pomfrey burst into tears. Nobody paid her any attention except Ginny, who whispered, “Shh! Listen!”

Gulping, Madam Pomfrey pressed her fingers to her mouth, her eyes wide. Somewhere out in the darkness, a phoenix was singing in a way Harry had never heard before: a stricken lament of terrible beauty. And Harry felt, as he had felt about phoenix song before, that the music was inside him, not without: It was his own grief turned magically to song that echoed across the grounds and through the castle windows.

How long they all stood there, listening, he did not know, nor why it seemed to ease their pain a little to listen to the sound of their mourning, but it felt like a long time later that the hospital door opened again and Professor McGonagall entered the ward. Like all the rest, she bore marks of the recent battle: There were grazes on her face and her robes were ripped.

“Molly and Arthur are on their way,” she said, and the spell of the music was broken: Everyone roused themselves as though coming out of trances, turning again to look at Bill, or else to rub their own eyes, shake their heads. “Harry, what happened? According to Hagrid you were with Professor Dumbledore when he — when it happened. He says Professor Snape was involved in some —”

“Snape killed Dumbledore,” said Harry.

She stared at him for a moment, then swayed alarmingly; Madam Pomfrey, who seemed to have pulled herself together, ran forward, conjuring a chair from thin air, which she pushed under McGonagall.

“Snape,” repeated McGonagall faintly, falling into the chair. “We all wondered . . . but he trusted . . . always . . . *Snape* . . . I can’t believe it. . . .”

“Snape was a highly accomplished Occlumens,” said Lupin, his voice uncharacteristically harsh. “We always knew that.”

“But Dumbledore swore he was on our side!” whispered Tonks. “I always thought Dumbledore must know something about Snape that we didn’t. . . .”

“He always hinted that he had an ironclad reason for trusting Snape,” muttered Professor McGonagall, now dabbing at the corners of her leaking eyes with a tartan-edged handkerchief. “I mean . . . with Snape’s history . . . of course people were bound to wonder . . . but Dumbledore told me explicitly that Snape’s repentance was absolutely genuine. . . . Wouldn’t hear a word against him!”

“I’d love to know what Snape told him to convince him,” said Tonks.

“I know,” said Harry, and they all turned to look at him. “Snape passed Voldemort the information that made Voldemort hunt down my mum and dad. Then Snape told Dumbledore he hadn’t realized what he was doing, he was really sorry he’d done it, sorry that they were dead.”

They all stared at him.

“And Dumbledore believed that?” said Lupin incredulously. “Dumbledore believed Snape was sorry James was dead? Snape *hated* James. . . .”

“And he didn’t think my mother was worth a damn either,” said Harry, “because she was Muggle-born. . . . ‘Mudblood,’ he called

her. . . .”

Nobody asked how Harry knew this. All of them seemed to be lost in horrified shock, trying to digest the monstrous truth of what had happened.

“This is all my fault,” said Professor McGonagall suddenly. She looked disoriented, twisting her wet handkerchief in her hands. “My fault. I sent Filius to fetch Snape tonight, I actually sent for him to come and help us! If I hadn’t alerted Snape to what was going on, he might never have joined forces with the Death Eaters. I don’t think he knew they were there before Filius told him, I don’t think he knew they were coming.”

“It isn’t your fault, Minerva,” said Lupin firmly. “We all wanted more help, we were glad to think Snape was on his way. . . .”

“So when he arrived at the fight, he joined in on the Death Eaters’ side?” asked Harry, who wanted every detail of Snape’s duplicity and infamy, feverishly collecting more reasons to hate him, to swear vengeance.

“I don’t know exactly how it happened,” said Professor McGonagall distractedly. “It’s all so confusing. . . . Dumbledore had told us that he would be leaving the school for a few hours and that we were to patrol the corridors just in case . . . Remus, Bill, and Nymphadora were to join us . . . and so we patrolled. All seemed quiet. Every secret passageway out of the school was covered. We knew nobody could fly in. There were powerful enchantments on every entrance into the castle. I still don’t know how the Death Eaters can possibly have entered. . . .”

“I do,” said Harry, and he explained, briefly, about the pair of

Vanishing Cabinets and the magical pathway they formed. “So they got in through the Room of Requirement.”

Almost against his will he glanced from Ron to Hermione, both of whom looked devastated.

“I messed up, Harry,” said Ron bleakly. “We did like you told us: We checked the Marauder’s Map and we couldn’t see Malfoy on it, so we thought he must be in the Room of Requirement, so me, Ginny, and Neville went to keep watch on it . . . but Malfoy got past us.”

“He came out of the room about an hour after we started keeping watch,” said Ginny. “He was on his own, clutching that awful shriveled arm—”

“His Hand of Glory,” said Ron. “Gives light only to the holder, remember?”

“Anyway,” Ginny went on, “he must have been checking whether the coast was clear to let the Death Eaters out, because the moment he saw us he threw something into the air and it all went pitch-black —”

“— Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder,” said Ron bitterly. “Fred and George’s. I’m going to be having a word with them about who they let buy their products.”

“We tried everything, Lumos, Incendio,” said Ginny. “Nothing would penetrate the darkness; all we could do was grope our way out of the corridor again, and meanwhile we could hear people rushing past us. Obviously Malfoy could see because of that hand thing and was guiding them, but we didn’t dare use any curses or anything in case we hit each other, and by the time we’d reached a corridor that was light, they’d gone.”

“Luckily,” said Lupin hoarsely, “Ron, Ginny, and Neville ran into us almost immediately and told us what had happened. We found the Death Eaters minutes later, heading in the direction of the Astronomy Tower. Malfoy obviously hadn’t expected more people to be on the watch; he seemed to have exhausted his supply of Darkness Powder, at any rate. A fight broke out, they scattered and we gave chase. One of them, Gibbon, broke away and headed up the tower stairs —”

“To set off the Mark?” asked Harry.

“He must have done, yes, they must have arranged that before they left the Room of Requirement,” said Lupin. “But I don’t think Gibbon liked the idea of waiting up there alone for Dumbledore, because he came running back downstairs to rejoin the fight and was hit by a Killing Curse that just missed me.”

“So if Ron was watching the Room of Requirement with Ginny and Neville,” said Harry, turning to Hermione, “were you — ?”

“Outside Snape’s office, yes,” whispered Hermione, her eyes sparkling with tears, “with Luna. We hung around for ages outside it and nothing happened. . . . We didn’t know what was going on upstairs, Ron had taken the map. . . . It was nearly midnight when Professor Flitwick came sprinting down into the dungeons. He was shouting about Death Eaters in the castle, I don’t think he really registered that Luna and I were there at all, he just burst his way into Snape’s office and we heard him saying that Snape had to go back with him and help and then we heard a loud thump and Snape came hurtling out of his room and he saw us and — and —”

“What?” Harry urged her.

“I was so stupid, Harry!” said Hermione in a high-pitched

whisper. “He said Professor Flitwick had collapsed and that we should go and take care of him while he — while he went to help fight the Death Eaters —” She covered her face in shame and continued to talk into her fingers, so that her voice was muffled. “We went into his office to see if we could help Professor Flitwick and found him unconscious on the floor . . . and oh, it’s so obvious now, Snape must have Stupefied Flitwick, but we didn’t realize, Harry, we didn’t realize, we just let Snape go!”

“It’s not your fault,” said Lupin firmly. “Hermione, had you not obeyed Snape and got out of the way, he probably would have killed you and Luna.”

“So then he came upstairs,” said Harry, who was watching Snape running up the marble staircase in his mind’s eye, his black robes billowing behind him as ever, pulling his wand from under his cloak as he ascended, “and he found the place where you were all fighting. . . .”

“We were in trouble, we were losing,” said Tonks in a low voice. “Gibbon was down, but the rest of the Death Eaters seemed ready to fight to the death. Neville had been hurt, Bill had been savaged by Greyback . . . It was all dark . . . curses flying everywhere . . . The Malfoy boy had vanished, he must have slipped past, up the stairs . . . then more of them ran after him, but one of them blocked the stair behind them with some kind of curse. . . . Neville ran at it and got thrown up into the air —”

“None of us could break through,” said Ron, “and that massive Death Eater was still firing off jinxes all over the place, they were bouncing off the walls and barely missing us. . . .”

“And then Snape was there,” said Tonks, “and then he wasn’t —”

“I saw him running toward us, but that huge Death Eater’s jinx just missed me right afterward and I ducked and lost track of things,” said Ginny.

“I saw him run straight through the cursed barrier as though it wasn’t there,” said Lupin. “I tried to follow him, but was thrown back just like Neville. . . .”

“He must have known a spell we didn’t,” whispered McGonagall. “After all — he was the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. . . . I just assumed that he was in a hurry to chase after the Death Eaters who’d escaped up to the tower. . . .”

“He was,” said Harry savagely, “but to help them, not to stop them . . . and I’ll bet you had to have a Dark Mark to get through that barrier — so what happened when he came back down?”

“Well, the big Death Eater had just fired off a hex that caused half the ceiling to fall in, and also broke the curse blocking the stairs,” said Lupin. “We all ran forward — those of us who were still standing anyway — and then Snape and the boy emerged out of the dust — obviously, none of us attacked them —”

“We just let them pass,” said Tonks in a hollow voice. “We thought they were being chased by the Death Eaters — and next thing, the other Death Eaters and Greyback were back and we were fighting again — I thought I heard Snape shout something, but I don’t know what —”

“He shouted, ‘It’s over,’” said Harry. “He’d done what he’d meant to do.”

They all fell silent. Fawkes’s lament was still echoing over the

dark grounds outside. As the music reverberated upon the air, unbidden, unwelcome thoughts slunk into Harry's mind. . . . Had they taken Dumbledore's body from the foot of the tower yet? What would happen to it next? Where would it rest? He clenched his fists tightly in his pockets. He could feel the small cold lump of the fake Horcrux against the knuckles of his right hand.

The doors of the hospital wing burst open, making them all jump: Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were striding up the ward, Fleur just behind them, her beautiful face terrified.

"Molly — Arthur —" said Professor McGonagall, jumping up and hurrying to greet them. "I am so sorry —"

"Bill," whispered Mrs. Weasley, darting past Professor McGonagall as she caught sight of Bill's mangled face. "Oh, *Bill!*"

Lupin and Tonks had got up hastily and retreated so that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could get nearer to the bed. Mrs. Weasley bent over her son and pressed her lips to his bloody forehead.

"You said Greyback attacked him?" Mr. Weasley asked Professor McGonagall distractedly. "But he hadn't transformed? So what does that mean? What will happen to Bill?"

"We don't yet know," said Professor McGonagall, looking helplessly at Lupin.

"There will probably be some contamination, Arthur," said Lupin. "It is an odd case, possibly unique. . . . We don't know what his behavior might be like when he awakens. . . ."

Mrs. Weasley took the nasty-smelling ointment from Madam Pomfrey and began dabbing at Bill's wounds.

"And Dumbledore . . ." said Mr. Weasley. "Minerva, is it true . . ."

Is he really . . . ?”

As Professor McGonagall nodded, Harry felt Ginny move beside him and looked at her. Her slightly narrowed eyes were fixed upon Fleur, who was gazing down at Bill with a frozen expression on her face.

“Dumbledore gone,” whispered Mr. Weasley, but Mrs. Weasley had eyes only for her eldest son; she began to sob, tears falling onto Bill’s mutilated face.

“Of course, it doesn’t matter how he looks. . . . It’s not r-really important . . . but he was a very handsome little b-boy . . . always very handsome . . . and he was g-going to be married!”

“And what do you mean by zat?” said Fleur suddenly and loudly. “What do you mean, ‘e was *going* to be married?”

Mrs. Weasley raised her tear-stained face, looking startled. “Well — only that —”

“You theenk Bill will not wish to marry me anymore?” demanded Fleur. “You theenk, because of these bites, he will not love me?”

“No, that’s not what I —”

“Because ’e will!” said Fleur, drawing herself up to her full height and throwing back her long mane of silver hair. “It would take more zan a werewolf to stop Bill loving me!”

“Well, yes, I’m sure,” said Mrs. Weasley, “but I thought perhaps — given how — how he —”

“You thought I would not weesh to marry him? Or per’aps, you hoped?” said Fleur, her nostrils flaring. “What do I care how he looks? I am good-looking enough for both of us, I theenk! All these scars show is zat my husband is brave! And I shall do zat!” she

added fiercely, pushing Mrs. Weasley aside and snatching the ointment from her.

Mrs. Weasley fell back against her husband and watched Fleur mopping up Bill's wounds with a most curious expression upon her face. Nobody said anything; Harry did not dare move. Like everybody else, he was waiting for the explosion.

"Our Great-Auntie Muriel," said Mrs. Weasley after a long pause, "has a very beautiful tiara — goblin-made — which I am sure I could persuade her to lend you for the wedding. She is very fond of Bill, you know, and it would look lovely with your hair."

"Thank you," said Fleur stiffly. "I am sure zat will be lovely."

And then, Harry did not quite see how it happened, both women were crying and hugging each other. Completely bewildered, wondering whether the world had gone mad, he turned around: Ron looked as stunned as he felt and Ginny and Hermione were exchanging startled looks.

"You see!" said a strained voice. Tonks was glaring at Lupin. "She still wants to marry him, even though he's been bitten! She doesn't care!"

"It's different," said Lupin, barely moving his lips and looking suddenly tense. "Bill will not be a full werewolf. The cases are completely —"

"But I don't care either, I don't care!" said Tonks, seizing the front of Lupin's robes and shaking them. "I've told you a million times. . . ."

And the meaning of Tonks's Patronus and her mouse-colored hair, and the reason she had come running to find Dumbledore when she

had heard a rumor someone had been attacked by Greyback, all suddenly became clear to Harry; it had not been Sirius that Tonks had fallen in love with after all.

“And I’ve told *you* a million times,” said Lupin, refusing to meet her eyes, staring at the floor, “that I am too old for you, too poor . . . too dangerous. . . .”

“I’ve said all along you’re taking a ridiculous line on this, Remus,” said Mrs. Weasley over Fleur’s shoulder as she patted her on the back.

“I am not being ridiculous,” said Lupin steadily. “Tonks deserves somebody young and whole.”

“But she wants you,” said Mr. Weasley, with a small smile. “And after all, Remus, young and whole men do not necessarily remain so.”

He gestured sadly at his son, lying between them.

“This is . . . not the moment to discuss it,” said Lupin, avoiding everybody’s eyes as he looked around distractedly. “Dumbledore is dead. . . .”

“Dumbledore would have been happier than anybody to think that there was a little more love in the world,” said Professor McGonagall curtly, just as the hospital doors opened again and Hagrid walked in.

The little of his face that was not obscured by hair or beard was soaking and swollen; he was shaking with tears, a vast, spotted handkerchief in his hand.

“I’ve . . . I’ve done it, Professor,” he choked. “M-moved him. Professor Sprout’s got the kids back in bed. Professor Flitwick’s

lyin' down, but he says he'll be all righ' in a jiffy, an' Professor Slughorn says the Ministry's bin informed."

"Thank you, Hagrid," said Professor McGonagall, standing up at once and turning to look at the group around Bill's bed. "I shall have to see the Ministry when they get here. Hagrid, please tell the Heads of Houses — Slughorn can represent Slytherin — that I want to see them in my office forthwith. I would like you to join us too."

As Hagrid nodded, turned, and shuffled out of the room again, she looked down at Harry. "Before I meet them I would like a quick word with you, Harry. If you'll come with me. . . ."

Harry stood up, murmured "See you in a bit" to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, and followed Professor McGonagall back down the ward. The corridors outside were deserted and the only sound was the distant phoenix song. It was several minutes before Harry became aware that they were not heading for Professor McGonagall's office, but for Dumbledore's, and another few seconds before he realized that of course, she had been deputy headmistress. . . . Apparently she was now headmistress . . . so the room behind the gargoyle was now hers.

In silence they ascended the moving spiral staircase and entered the circular office. He did not know what he had expected: that the room would be draped in black, perhaps, or even that Dumbledore's body might be lying there. In fact, it looked almost exactly as it had done when he and Dumbledore had left it mere hours previously: the silver instruments whirring and puffing on their spindle-legged tables, Gryffindor's sword in its glass case gleaming in the moonlight, the Sorting Hat on a shelf behind the desk. But Fawkes's

perch stood empty, he was still crying his lament to the grounds. And a new portrait had joined the ranks of the dead headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts: Dumbledore was slumbering in a golden frame over the desk, his half-moon spectacles perched upon his crooked nose, looking peaceful and untroubled.

After glancing once at this portrait, Professor McGonagall made an odd movement as though steeling herself, then rounded the desk to look at Harry, her face taut and lined.

“Harry,” she said, “I would like to know what you and Professor Dumbledore were doing this evening when you left the school.”

“I can’t tell you that, Professor,” said Harry. He had expected the question and had his answer ready. It had been here, in this very room, that Dumbledore had told him that he was to confide the contents of their lessons to nobody but Ron and Hermione.

“Harry, it might be important,” said Professor McGonagall.

“It is,” said Harry, “very, but he didn’t want me to tell anyone.”

Professor McGonagall glared at him. “Potter” — Harry registered the renewed use of his surname — “in the light of Professor Dumbledore’s death, I think you must see that the situation has changed somewhat —”

“I don’t think so,” said Harry, shrugging. “Professor Dumbledore never told me to stop following his orders if he died.”

“But —”

“There’s one thing you should know before the Ministry gets here, though. Madam Rosmerta’s under the Imperius Curse, she was helping Malfoy and the Death Eaters, that’s how the necklace and the poisoned mead —”

“Rosmerta?” said Professor McGonagall incredulously, but before she could go on, there was a knock on the door behind them and Professors Sprout, Flitwick, and Slughorn traipsed into the room, followed by Hagrid, who was still weeping copiously, his huge frame trembling with grief.

“Snape!” ejaculated Slughorn, who looked the most shaken, pale and sweating. “Snape! I taught him! I thought I knew him!”

But before any of them could respond to this, a sharp voice spoke from high on the wall: A sallow-faced wizard with a short black fringe had just walked back into his empty canvas.

“Minerva, the Minister will be here within seconds, he has just Disapparated from the Ministry.”

“Thank you, Everard,” said Professor McGonagall, and she turned quickly to her teachers.

“I want to talk about what happens to Hogwarts before he gets here,” she said quickly. “Personally, I am not convinced that the school should reopen next year. The death of the headmaster at the hands of one of our colleagues is a terrible stain upon Hogwarts’s history. It is horrible.”

“I am sure Dumbledore would have wanted the school to remain open,” said Professor Sprout. “I feel that if a single pupil wants to come, then the school ought to remain open for that pupil.”

“But will we have a single pupil after this?” said Slughorn, now dabbing his sweating brow with a silken handkerchief. “Parents will want to keep their children at home and I can’t say I blame them. Personally, I don’t think we’re in more danger at Hogwarts than we are anywhere else, but you can’t expect mothers to think like that.

They'll want to keep their families together, it's only natural."

"I agree," said Professor McGonagall. "And in any case, it is not true to say that Dumbledore never envisaged a situation in which Hogwarts might close. When the Chamber of Secrets reopened he considered the closure of the school — and I must say that Professor Dumbledore's murder is more disturbing to me than the idea of Slytherin's monster living undetected in the bowels of the castle. . . ."

"We must consult the governors," said Professor Flitwick in his squeaky little voice; he had a large bruise on his forehead but seemed otherwise unscathed by his collapse in Snape's office. "We must follow the established procedures. A decision should not be made hastily."

"Hagrid, you haven't said anything," said Professor McGonagall. "What are your views, ought Hogwarts to remain open?"

Hagrid, who had been weeping silently into his large, spotted handkerchief throughout this conversation, now raised puffy red eyes and croaked, "I dunno, Professor . . . that's fer the Heads of House an' the headmistress ter decide . . ."

"Professor Dumbledore always valued your views," said Professor McGonagall kindly, "and so do I."

"Well, I'm stayin'," said Hagrid, fat tears still leaking out of the corners of his eyes and trickling down into his tangled beard. "It's me home, it's bin me home since I was thirteen. An' if there's kids who wan' me ter teach 'em, I'll do it. But . . . I dunno . . . Hogwarts without Dumbledore . . ." He gulped and disappeared behind his handkerchief once more, and there was silence.

"Very well," said Professor McGonagall, glancing out of the

window at the grounds, checking to see whether the Minister was yet approaching, “then I must agree with Filius that the right thing to do is to consult the governors, who will make the final decision.

“Now, as to getting students home . . . there is an argument for doing it sooner rather than later. We could arrange for the Hogwarts Express to come tomorrow if necessary —”

“What about Dumbledore’s funeral?” said Harry, speaking at last.

“Well . . .” said Professor McGonagall, losing a little of her briskness as her voice shook. “I — I know that it was Dumbledore’s wish to be laid to rest here, at Hogwarts —”

“Then that’s what’ll happen, isn’t it?” said Harry fiercely.

“If the Ministry thinks it appropriate,” said Professor McGonagall. “No other headmaster or headmistress has ever been —”

“No other headmaster or headmistress ever gave more to this school,” growled Hagrid.

“Hogwarts should be Dumbledore’s final resting place,” said Professor Flitwick.

“Absolutely,” said Professor Sprout.

“And in that case,” said Harry, “you shouldn’t send the students home until the funeral’s over. They’ll want to say —”

The last word caught in his throat, but Professor Sprout completed the sentence for him.

“Good-bye.”

“Well said,” squeaked Professor Flitwick. “Well said indeed! Our students should pay tribute, it is fitting. We can arrange transport home afterward.”

“Seconded,” barked Professor Sprout.

“I suppose . . . yes . . .” said Slughorn in a rather agitated voice, while Hagrid let out a strangled sob of assent.

“He’s coming,” said Professor McGonagall suddenly, gazing down into the grounds. “The Minister . . . and by the looks of it, he’s brought a delegation . . .”

“Can I leave, Professor?” said Harry at once.

He had no desire at all to see, or be interrogated by, Rufus Scrimgeour tonight.

“You may,” said Professor McGonagall. “And quickly.”

She strode toward the door and held it open for him. He sped down the spiral staircase and off along the deserted corridor; he had left his Invisibility Cloak at the top of the Astronomy Tower, but it did not matter; there was nobody in the corridors to see him pass, not even Filch, Mrs. Norris, or Peeves. He did not meet another soul until he turned into the passage leading to the Gryffindor common room.

“Is it true?” whispered the Fat Lady as he approached her. “It is really true? Dumbledore — dead?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

She let out a wail and, without waiting for the password, swung forward to admit him.

As Harry had suspected it would be, the common room was jam-packed. The room fell silent as he climbed through the portrait hole. He saw Dean and Seamus sitting in a group nearby: This meant that the dormitory must be empty, or nearly so. Without speaking to anybody, without making eye contact at all, Harry walked straight across the room and through the door to the boys’ dormitories.

As he had hoped, Ron was waiting for him, still fully dressed, sitting on his bed. Harry sat down on his own four-poster and for a moment, they simply stared at each other.

“They’re talking about closing the school,” said Harry.

“Lupin said they would,” said Ron.

There was a pause.

“So?” said Ron in a very low voice, as though he thought the furniture might be listening in. “Did you find one? Did you get it? A — a Horcrux?”

Harry shook his head. All that had taken place around that black lake seemed like an old nightmare now; had it really happened, and only hours ago?

“You didn’t get it?” said Ron, looking crestfallen. “It wasn’t there?”

“No,” said Harry. “Someone had already taken it and left a fake in its place.”

“Already *taken* — ?”

Wordlessly, Harry pulled the fake locket from his pocket, opened it, and passed it to Ron. The full story could wait. . . . It did not matter tonight . . . nothing mattered except the end, the end of their pointless adventure, the end of Dumbledore’s life. . . .

“R.A.B.,” whispered Ron, “but who was that?”

“Dunno,” said Harry, lying back on his bed fully clothed and staring blankly upwards. He felt no curiosity at all about R.A.B.: He doubted that he would ever feel curious again. As he lay there, he became aware suddenly that the grounds were silent. Fawkes had stopped singing.

And he knew, without knowing how he knew it, that the phoenix had gone, had left Hogwarts for good, just as Dumbledore had left the school, had left the world . . . had left Harry.

Die Feniks se Treurlied

“Kom hier, Harry ...”

“Nee.”

“Jy kan nie hier bly nie, Harry ... Komaan nou ...”

“Nee.”

Hy wil nie van Dumbledore af weggaan nie, hy wil nêrens heen gaan nie. Hagrid se hand op sy skouer bewe. Dan sê 'n ander stem: “Komaan, Harry.”

'n Baie kleiner en warmer hand vou om syne en trek hom op. Hy gehoorsaam sonder om regtig daaroor te dink. Eers toe hy blindweg deur die groep mense stap, lei hy uit die effense blomreuk in die lug af dit is Ginny wat hom terug kasteel toe lei. Onverstaanbare stemme bestook hom met vroe, snikke en uitroepe en 'n weeklaag deurboor die nag, maar Harry en Ginny hou aan stap, terug met die trap op tot in die Ingangsportaal: Gesigte swem waserig voor Harry, mense staar hom aan, fluister, wonder, en Gryffindor se robyne glinster soos druppels bloed op die vloer terwyl hulle na die marmertrap toe loop. “Ons gaan siekeboeg toe,” sê Ginny.

“Ek makeer niks,” sê Harry.

“McGonagall se bevele,” sê Ginny. “Almal is daar bo: Ron en Hermione en Lupin en almal —”

Vrees roer weer in Harry se borskas: Hy het vergeet van die beweginglose liggame wat hy agtergelaat het.

“Ginny, wie anders is dood?”

“Toemaar, nie een van ons nie.”

“Maar die Donker Merk – Malfoy het gesê hy't oor 'n liggaam getree —”

“Dit was oor Bill, maar hy's oukei, hy lewe.”

Maar iets in haar stem sê vir Harry daar is fout.

“Is jy seker?”

“Natuurlik, ja ... hy's 'n – 'n bietjie van 'n gemors, dis al. Greyback het hom aangeval. Madame Pomfrey sê hy sal nie – hy sal nie meer dieselfde lyk nie ...” Ginny se stem bewe effens. “Ons weet nie regtig

wat die nagevolge gaan wees nie – ek bedoel, Greyback is ’n weerwolf, maar hy was nie getransformeer toe hy Bill aangeval het nie.”

“Maar die ander ... daar was ander liggame ook op die grond ...”

“Neville is in die siekeboeg, maar Madame Pomfrey dink hy sal heeltemal regkom, en professor Flitwick was bewusteloos, maar hy’s oukei, net bietjie bewerig. Hy het daarop aangedring om terug Raweklou toe te gaan. Daar’s ’n Doodseter dood; hy is getref deur een van die Moordvloeke wat daardie groot blonde ou so wild afgevuur het – Harry, as ons nie jou Felix Felicis-towerdrankie gedrink het nie, dink ek ons sou almal dood gewees het, maar alles het ons net-net gemis –”

Hulle is nou by die siekeboeg. Harry stoot die deure oop en sien Neville, wat in ’n bed naby die deur lê en slaap. Ron, Hermione, Luna, Tonks en Lupin staan almal om ’n ander bed aan die verste kant van die saal. Toe die deure oopgaan, kyk hulle almal op. Hermione hardloop na Harry en omhels hom; Lupin beweeg ook vorentoe en lyk baie bekommerd.

“Is jy oukei, Harry?”

“Ek makeer niks ... Hoe gaan dit met Bill?”

Niemand antwoord nie. Harry kyk oor Hermione se skouer: Daar lê ’n onherkenbare gesig wat so erg verskeur is dat dit grotesk lyk op Bill se kussing. Madame Pomfrey is besig om groen salf wat aaklig ruik aan sy wonde te smeer. Harry onthou hoe Snape Malfoy se wonde so maklik met sy towerstaf gesond gemaak het ná die *Sectumsempra*-spreuk.

“Kan mens dit nie met ’n spreuk of iets regkry nie?” vra hy vir die matrone.

“Geen towerspreuk werk hiervoor nie,” sê Madame Pomfrey. “Ek het almal wat ek ken al probeer, maar daar is niks wat weerwolfbyte genees nie.”

“Maar hy’s nie met volmaan gebyt nie,” sê Ron, wat na sy broer se gesig staar asof hy hom op ’n manier kan dwing om gesond te word deur net so stip na hom te kyk. “Greyback het nie getransformeer nie, so Bill sal dan mos nie ’n – ’n regte – ?”

Hy kyk onseker na Lupin.

“Nee, ek dink nie Bill sal ’n volwaardige weerwolf wees nie,” sê Lupin, “maar dit beteken nie daar is nie ’n mate van besmetting nie. Dis vervloekte wonde daardie. Dis onwaarskynlik dat hulle ooit ten volle sal genees en – en Bill sal miskien van nou af sekere wolfagtige eienskappe hê.”

“Dalk weet Dumbledore van iets wat sal help,” sê Ron. “Waar is hy? Harry het op Dumbledore se bevel teen daai maniakke baklei; Dumbledore skuld hom; hy kan hom nie in hierdie toestand –”

“Ron – Dumbledore is dood,” sê Ginny.

“Neel!” Lupin kyk wild van Ginny na Harry asof hy hoop Harry gaan haar weerspreek, maar toe hy dit nie doen nie, sak Lupin met sy hande oor sy gesig in ’n stoel langs Bill se bed neer. Harry het Lupin nog nooit voorheen beheer sien verloor nie; dit voel vir hom of hy inbreuk maak op iets wat privaat en onbetaamlik is; hy draai weg, vang Ron se oog en bevestig woordeloos wat Ginny gesê het.

“Hoe is hy dood?” fluister Tonks. “Hoe het dit gebeur?”

“Snape het hom doodgemaak,” sê Harry. “Ek was daar; ek het dit gesien. Ons is bo na die Sterrekundetoring toe, want dis waar die Merk was ... Dumbledore was siek, hy was swak, maar ek dink hy het besef dis ’n lokval toe ons die voetstappe met die trap hoor op-hardloop. Hy het my vasgevries. Ek kon niks doen nie; ek was onder die Onsigbaarheidsmantel – en toe kom Malfoy by die deur uit en Ontwapen hom –”

Hermione se hande vlieg na haar mond en Ron kreun. Luna se mond bewe.

“– nóg Doodseters het daar aangekom – en toe Snape – en Snape het dit gedoen. Die Avada Kedavra.” Harry kan nie aangaan nie.

Madame Pomfrey bars in trane uit. Niemand gee enige aandag aan haar nie, behalwe Ginny wat fluister: “Sjuut! Luister!”

Terwyl sy swaar sluk, druk Madame Pomfrey haar vingers teen haar mond en luister met groot oë. Iewers vanuit die donker sing die feniks op ’n manier wat Harry nog nooit voorheen gehoor het nie: ’n bedroefde treurlied wat hartverskeurend mooi is. En Harry voel, soos wat hy al voorheen oor die feniks se sang gevoel het, die musiek is binne-in homself, nie buitekant nie: Dit is sy eie verdriet wat op magiese wyse omskep word in ’n lied wat oor die skoolgrond en deur die kasteel se vensters eggo.

Hy weet nie hoe lank hulle só staan en luister het, en ook nie hoekom dit voel of dit hulle pyn effens verlig om na die klank van hulle droefheid te luister nie, maar dit voel na baie later dat die siekeboeg se deure weer oopgaan en professor McGonagall by die saal instap. Net soos al die ander toon sy tekens van die onlangse geveg: Daar is krapmerke aan haar gesig en haar kleed is geskeur.

“Molly en Arthur is op pad,” sê sy en die musiek se betowering is verbreek: Almal word wakker asof hulle in ’n beswyming was, draai weer om en kyk na Bill of vryf hulle oë en skud hulle koppe. “Harry, wat het gebeur? Hagrid sê jy was by professor Dumbledore toe hy – toe dit gebeur het. Hy sê professor Snape was op een of ander manier betrokke –”

“Snape het Dumbledore doodgemaak,” sê Harry.

Sy staar hom vir 'n oomblik aan en steier dan gevaarlik; Madame Pomfrey het haar intussen reggeruk; sy kom vinnig vorentoe, tower 'n stoel uit die niet op en stoot dit onder professor McGonagall in.

"Snape," herhaal professor McGonagall flou en val in die stoel neer. "Ons het almal gewonder ... maar hy het Snape altyd ... vertrou ... Ek kan dit nie glo nie ..."

"Snape is 'n uiters bekwame Okklumens," sê Lupin en sy stem klink ongewoon skerp. "Ons het dit altyd geweet."

"Maar Dumbledore het gesweer hy was aan ons kant!" fluister Tonks. "Ek het altyd gedink Dumbledore weet iets van Snape wat ons nie weet nie ..."

"Hy het altyd gesuggereer hy het 'n waterdigte rede om Snape te vertrou," prewel professor McGonagall terwyl sy haar betraande ooghoeke met 'n sakdoek met 'n geruite randjie afvee. "Ek bedoel ... met Snape se geskiedenis ... het mense natuurlik altyd oor hom gewonder ... maar Dumbledore het uitdruklik vir my gesê dat Snape se berou absoluut eg was ... Hy wou nooit 'n slegte woord van hom hoor nie!"

"Ek wens ek het geweet wat Snape vir hom gesê het om hom te oortuig," sê Tonks.

"Ek weet," sê Harry en almal staar hom aan. "Snape het vir Voldemort die inligting gegee wat veroorsaak het dat Voldemort op my ma en pa jag gemaak het. Toe sê Snape vir Dumbledore hy het nie besef wat hy gedoen het nie en hy's vreeslik jammer hy't dit gedoen en verskriklik jammer hulle's dood."

"En Dumbledore het dit geglo?" vra Lupin ongelowig. "Dumbledore het geglo Snape was jammer James is dood? Snape het James gehaat ..."

"En hy't ook nie gedink my ma is enigiets werd nie," sê Harry, "want sy was 'n Moggel ... Hy't haar 'n 'Modderbloed' genoem ..."

Niemand vra hoe Harry dit weet nie. Almal ly te veel aan skok en probeer nog om die afgryslike waarheid van dit wat gebeur het, te verwerk.

"Dit is alles my skuld," sê professor McGonagall skielik. Sy lyk ontredderd en verfrommel haar nat sakdoek met haar hande. "My skuld. Ek het Filius vanaand gestuur om Snape te gaan haal; ek het hom sowaar ontbied om ons te kom help! As ek Snape nie in kennis gestel het van wat aangaan nie sou hy dalk nooit by die Doodseters aangesluit het nie. Ek dink nie hy het geweet hulle is hier voor Filius hom gaan sê het nie; ek dink nie hy het geweet hulle is op pad nie."

"Dis nie jou skuld nie, Minerva," sê Lupin beslis. "Ons wou almal nog hulp hê; ons was bly Snape is op pad ..."

“En toe hy by julle kom, het hy dadelik aan die Doodseters se kant begin baklei?” vra Harry, wat elke enkele detail van Snape se valsheid en verraad wil weet, koorsagtig om nóg redes te kry om hom te haat en wraak te sweer.

“Ek weet nie wat presies gebeur het nie,” sê professor McGonagall verbysterd. “Dis alles so deurmekaar ... Dumbledore het vir ons gesê hy gaan die skool vir ’n paar uur verlaat en dat ons die gange moet patroleer, net ingeval ... Remus, Bill en Nymphadora het by ons aangesluit ... en toe patroleer ons die plek. Alles het doodstil gelyk. Ons het elke geheime uitgang in die skool dopgehou. Ons het geweet niemand kan hiernatoe invlieg nie. Al die ingange tot die skool word deur sterk towerspreuke beskerm. Ek weet nog steeds nie hoe die Doodseters hier ingekom het nie ...”

“Ek weet,” sê Harry en verduidelik kortliks van die twee Verdwyn-kabinette en die magiese tunnel tussen hulle. “So hulle het deur die Vertrek van Vereistes ingekom.”

Amper teen sy wil kyk hy vlugtig van Ron na Hermione; hulle lyk al twee verpletter.

“Ek het aangejaag, Harry,” sê Ron droewig. “Ons het gemaak soos jy vir ons gesê het: ons het op die Plunderaar se Kaart gekyk en kon Malfoy nie daarop sien nie, so toe dog ons hy’s in die Vertrek van Vereistes en toe is ek, Ginny en Neville soontoe om daar wag te staan ... maar Malfoy het verby ons gekom.”

“Hy’t omtrent ’n uur ná ons die Vertrek begin bewaak het daar uitgekome,” sê Ginny. “Hy was alleen en hy’t daardie aaklige, verskrompelde arm vasgehou –”

“Sy Hand van Glorie,” sê Ron. “Gee slegs vir die een wat hom vashou lig, onthou?”

“In elk geval,” gaan Ginny aan, “hy moes seker kyk of dit veilig is vir die Doodseters om uit te kom, want die oomblik toe hy ons sien, het hy iets in die lug op gegooi en alles het pikdonker geraak –”

“– Peruviaanse Kitsdonkerpoeier,” sê Ron bitter. “Fred en George s’n. Ek gaan bietjie met hulle praat oor wie hulle toelaat om hulle produkte te koop.”

“Ons het alles probeer – *Lumos, Incendio*,” sê Ginny, “maar niks wou die donker wegvat nie. Al wat ons kon doen, was om al voelende by die gang te probeer uitkom terwyl ons hoor hoe mense verby ons hardloop. Malfoy kon natuurlik sien oor hy daai Hand-ding gehad het en hy het hulle daar uitgelei, maar ons kon dit nie waag om enige vloeke of goed te gebruik nie ingeval ons mekaar sou tref, en teen die tyd dat ons by ’n gang met lig uitgekome het, was hulle weg.”

“Gelukkig,” sê Lupin hees, “het Ron, Ginny en Neville omtrent dadelik op ons afgekom en vir ons vertel wat gebeur het. Ons het die Doodseters minute later opgespoor: Hulle was op pad na die Sterrekundetoring. Malfoy het blykbaar nie verwag dat daar nóg mense wag staan nie; hy het teen daardie tyd al sy hele voorraad Donkerpoeier opgebruik. Daar het ’n geveg losgebars, hulle het laat spaander en ons het hulle agterna gesit. Een van hulle, Gibbon, het weggebreek en met die Toring se trap opgehardloop –”

“Om die Merk te gaan opsit?” vra Harry.

“Moet wees, ja. Hulle moes so aangespreek het voor hulle by die Vertrek van Vereistes uitgekom het,” sê Lupin. “Maar ek dink nie Gibbon het gehou van die idee dat hy alleen daar bo vir Dumbledore moes wag nie, want hy het weer met die trap afgehardloop en kom saam veg; dit was toe dat ’n Moordvloek wat my skrams gemis het, hom tref.”

“So as Ron die Vertrek van Vereistes saam met Ginny en Neville dopgehou het,” sê Harry en draai na Hermione, “dan was jy – ?”

“Buite Snape se kantoor, ja,” fluister Hermione met oë wat blink van die trane, “saam met Luna. Ons het vir ewig daar gewag, maar niks het gebeur nie ... Ons het nie geweet wat gaan bo aan nie; Ron het die Plunderaar se Kaart gehad ... Dit was amper middernag toe professor Flitwick daar by die kerkers aangehardloop kom en iets skree van Doodseters in die kasteel. Ek dink nie hy’t eers geregistreer dat ek en Luna daar was nie; hy’t net by Snape se kantoor ingebars en ons het gehoor hy sê vir Snape om saam met hom boontoe te kom om te help, en toe hoor ons ’n harde slag en Snape kom by sy kantoor uitgehardloop en sien ons en – en –”

“Wat?” por Harry haar aan.

“Ek was so dom, Harry!” sê Hermione in ’n hoë fluisterstem. “Hy’t gesê professor Flitwick het ineengestort en ons moet ingaan en hom lawe sodat hy – sodat hy die mense bo teen die Doodseters kan help veg –”

Sy druk haar gesig in skaamte toe en praat verder deur haar vingers sodat haar stem gesmoord is.

“Ons is by sy kantoor in om te sien wat ons vir professor Flitwick kan doen. Hy’t bewusteloos op die vloer geslê ... en, o, dis nou so duidelik: Snape moes Flitwick Bedwelm het, maar ons het dit nie besef nie, Harry, ons het dit nie besef nie; ons het Snape net laat gaan!”

“Dis nie julle skuld nie,” sê Lupin ferm. “Hermione, as julle nie gedoen het wat Snape gesê het nie, sou hy jou en Luna heel moontlik doodgemaak het.”

“So toe kom hy boontoe,” sê Harry en sien voor sy geestesooog hoe Snape by die trap ophardloop met sy swart kleed wat soos altyd agter hom bol staan terwyl hy sy towerstaf uitpluk en gereed hou, “na waar julle almal aan die baklei was ...”

“Ons was in die moeilikheid; ons was besig om te verloor,” sê Tonks in ’n lae stem. “Gibbon was uitgeskakel, maar die res van die Doodseters was bereid om tot die dood te veg. Neville was beseer, Greyback het Bill verskeur ... dit was donker ... daar het vloeke heen en weer gevlieg ... die Malfoy-seun het verdwyn; hy moes verbygeglim het, met die trap op Toring toe ... toe hardloop nog van hulle agter hom aan, maar een van hulle het die trap met ’n vloek versper ... Neville het daarop afgenael en is in die lug op gegooi –”

“Nie een van ons kon deurbreek nie,” sê Ron, “en daai massiewe Doodseter het nog steeds wild paljasse afgevuur; die goed het van die mure af teruggespring en ons net-net gemis ...”

“En toe was Snape daar,” sê Tonks, “en toe nie meer nie –”

“Ek het gesien hoe kom hy op ons af gehardloop, maar toe moes ek vir daai yslike Doodseter se paljas koes en daarna kon ek nie meer met alles byhou nie,” sê Ginny.

“Ek het gesien hoe hy reguit deur die vloekversperring hardloop asof dit nie daar was nie,” sê Lupin. “Ek het hom probeer agternasit, maar is net soos Neville teruggegooi ...”

“Hy moet ’n towerspreuk ken waarvan ons nie weet nie,” fluister McGonagall. “Per slot van rekening ... hy was die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-onderwyser ... Ek het net aanvaar hy is agter die Doodseters wat op Toring toe ontsnap het aan ...”

“Hy is,” sê Harry wild, “maar om hulle te help, nie om hulle te keer nie ... en ek wed julle jy’t ’n Donker Merk nodig om deur daardie versperring te kom – so wat het gebeur toe hy weer terug ondertoe kom?”

“Wel, die groot Doodseter het so pas weer ’n paljas afgevuur wat die helfte van die plafon laat instort het, en dit het ook die vloek wat die trap versper, verbreek,” sê Lupin. “Ons het almal vorentoe gehardloop – ten minste, dié van ons wat nog staande was – en toe het Snape en die seun uit die stof verskyn – en nie een van ons het hulle natuurlik aangeval nie –”

“Ons het hulle eenvoudig laat verbygaan,” sê Tonks in ’n hol stem. “Ons het gedog die Doodseter jaag hulle – en die volgende oomblik was die ander Doodseters en Greyback weer terug en ons het weer begin veg – ek het gedink ek hoor Snape iets skree, maar ek weet nie wat nie –”

“Hy’t geskree: ‘Dis genoeg’,” sê Harry. “Hy’t gedoen wat hy wou doen.”

Almal raak stil. Fawkes se treurlied eggo steeds buite oor die donker skoolgrond. Die musiek vul nog die lug, maar daar begin ongevraagde, onwelkome gedagtes by Harry se kop insluip ... Het hulle Dumbledore se liggaam al by die voet van die Toring wegge- neem? Wat gaan nou daarvan word? Waar gaan dit ter ruste gelê word? Hy bal sy vuiste in sy sakke. Hy voel die koue, vals Horcrux teen sy regterhand se kneukels.

Die siekeboeg se deure bars oop en almal wip van die skrik: meneer en mevrou Weasley kom ingestap met Fleur net agter hulle, haar pragtige gesig verskrik.

“Molly – Arthur –” sê professor McGonagall en spring op om hulle tegemoet te gaan. “Ek is so jammer –”

“Bill,” fluister mevrou Weasley en storm verby professor McGonagall toe sy Bill se verminkte gesig sien. “O, Bill!”

Lupin en Tonks staan haastig op en maak plek sodat meneer en mevrou Weasley nader aan die bed kan kom. Mevrouw Weasley buk af oor haar seun en druk haar lippe teen sy bebloede voorkop.

“Jy’t gesê Greyback het hom aangeval?” vra meneer Weasley verbysterd vir professor McGonagall. “Maar hy het nie getransformeer nie? So wat beteken dit? Wat gaan met Bill gebeur?”

“Ons weet nog nie,” sê professor McGonagall en kyk na Lupin vir hulp.

“Daar sal moontlik ’n mate van besmetting wees, Arthur,” sê Lupin. “Dis ’n vreemde geval, moontlik uniek ... Ons weet nie hoe hy sal optree wanneer hy wakker word nie ...”

Mevrou Weasley neem die salf wat so aaklig ruik by madame Pomfrey en begin dit aan Bill se wonde smeer.

“En Dumbledore ...” sê meneer Weasley. “Minerva, is dit waar ... Is hy regtig ...?”

Terwyl professor McGonagall knik, voel Harry Ginny langs hom beweeg en hy kyk na haar. Haar oë is effens vernou en sy kyk stip na Fleur, wat met ’n verstarde uitdrukking op haar gesig na Bill af staar.

“Dumbledore weg,” fluister meneer Weasley, maar mevrou Weasley se oë bly net op haar oudste seun gerig; sy begin snik en haar trane val op Bill se verskeurde gesig.

“Dit maak glad nie saak hoe hy lyk nie... dis nie regtig b-belang- rik nie ... maar hy was ’n baie m-mooi ou seuntjie ... altyd baie aantreklik ... en hy sou, hy sou getrou het!”

“En wat bedoel jy daarmee?” vra Fleur skielik en hard. “Wat bedoel jy, ’y sou getrou ’et?”

Mevrou Weasley lig haar betraande gesig en lyk verskrik.

“Wel – net dat –”

“Dink jy Bill sal nie meer met my wil trou nie?” wil Fleur weet.

“Dink jy ’y sal my nie meer lief’ê nie – oor ’ierdie byte?”

“Nee, dis nie wat ek –”

“Want ’y sal!” sê Fleur. Sy staan penregop en gooi haar lang bos silwer hare terug oor haar skouers. “Dit sal meer as ’n weerwolf neem om Bill se liefde vir my dood te maak!”

“Wel, ja, ek is seker daarvan,” sê mevrou Weasley, “maar ek het gedink miskien – aangesien – hy nou só –”

“Jy dink ek sal nie meer met ’om wil trou nie? Of miskien ’oop jy so!” sê Fleur en haar neusvleuels tril. “Wat gee ek om ’oe ’y lyk? Ek dink ek is aantreklik genoeg vir ons albei! Al wat daardie letsels wys, is dat my man dapper is! En ek sal dit doen!” voeg sy driftig by, druk mevrou Weasley opsy en gryp die salf by haar.

Mevrou Weasley steier terug tot teen haar man en kyk met ’n baie vreemde uitdrukking op haar gesig hoe Fleur Bill se wonde behandel. Niemand sê enigiets nie; Harry waag dit nie om te beweeg nie. Hy wag nes al die ander vir die ontploffing.

“Ons groot tante Muriel,” sê mevrou Weasley ná ’n lang pouse, “het ’n baie mooi tiara – deur kabouters gemaak – en ek is seker ek sal haar kan ompraat om dit vir jou vir die troue te leen. Sy is baie erg oor Bill, jy weet, en dit sal lieflik by jou hare pas.”

“Dankie,” sê Fleur stywerig. “Ek is seker dit sal baie mooi wees.”

En toe – Harry het nie heeltemal gesien hoe dit gebeur het nie – bars al twee vrouens in trane uit en omhels mekaar. Totaal oorbluf en oortuig dat die wêreld mal geword het, draai hy om: Ron lyk so verstom soos wat Harry voel, en Ginny en Hermione kyk mekaar geskok aan.

“Sien jy!” sê ’n gespanne stem. Tonks gluur vir Lupin. “Sy wil nog steeds met hom trou, selfs al is hy gebyt! Sy gee nie om nie!”

“Dis anders,” sê Lupin deur stywe lippe en hy lyk skielik op sy senuwees. “Bill sal nie ten volle ’n weerwolf wees nie. Die twee gevalle is heeltemal –”

“Maar ek gee ook nie om nie, ek gee nie om nie!” sê Tonks terwyl sy Lupin se kleed voor vasgryp en dit skud. “Ek het jou al ’n miljoen keer gesê ...”

En skielik verstaan Harry alles: hoekom Tonks se Patronus verswak het en haar hare so muiskleurig geword het, en hoekom sy Dumbledore so dringend wou sien ná sy ’n gerug gehoor het dat Greyback iemand aangeval het; dit was toe nooit Sirius op wie Tonks verlief geraak het nie ...

“En ek het *jou* al ’n miljoen keer gesê,” sê Lupin, wat weier om haar in die oë te kyk en stip na die vloer staar, “dat ek te oud vir jou is, te arm ... te gevaarlik ...”

“Ek sê al van die begin af vir jou jy’s belaglik wat hierdie saak betref, Remus,” sê mevrou Weasley oor Fleur se skouer terwyl sy haar op die rug klop.

“Ek is nie belaglik nie,” sê Lupin kalm. “Tonks verdien iemand jonk en heel.”

“Maar sy wil vir jou hê,” sê meneer Weasley met ’n klein glimlaggie. “En onthou net, Remus; jong en heel mans bly nie noodwendig so nie.” Hy wys hartseer na sy seun wat tussen hulle lê.

“Dit is ... nie nou die tyd om hieroor te praat nie,” sê Lupin en lyk verward toe hy almal se oë vermy. “Dumbledore is dood ...”

“Dumbledore sou blyer as enigiemand anders gewees het om te weet daar is ’n bietjie meer liefde in die wêreld,” sê professor McGonagall kortaf net toe die siekeboeg se deure weer oopgaan en Hagrid instap.

Die stukkie van sy gesig wat nie onder hare of baard toe is nie, is papnat en opgeswel; hy skud van die snikke en hou ’n yslike kolletjiesakdoek in sy hand vas.

“Ek ... ek het dit gedoen, professor,” sê hy snikkend. “H – hom daar weggeneem. Professor Sprout het al die kinders terug bed toe gestuur. Professor Flitwick lê ’n bietjie skuins, maar hy sê hy sal gou weer reg wees en professor Slughorn sê die Ministerie is in kennis gestel.”

“Dankie, Hagrid,” sê professor McGonagall. Sy draai na die groep om Bill se bed. “Ek sal die Ministerie te woord moet staan wanneer hulle hier aankom. Hagrid, sê asseblief vir die Huishoofde – Slughorn kan Slytherin verteenwoordig – ek wil hulle onmiddellik in my kantoor spreek. Ek sal bly wees as jy ook by ons kan aansluit.”

Terwyl Hagrid knik, omdraai en sleepvoet by die siekeboeg uitloop, kyk sy af na Harry.

“Voor ek hulle ontmoet, wil ek vinnig ’n woordjie met jou wissel, Harry. Kom asseblief saam met my ...”

Harry staan op, fluister: “Sien julle bietjie later,” vir Ron, Hermione en Ginny, en volg professor McGonagall by die saal uit. Die gange buite is verlate en die enigste geluid wat hulle hoor, is die feniks se lied ver op die agtergrond. Dit neem ’n hele paar minute voor Harry agterkom hulle gaan nie na professor McGonagall se kantoor toe nie, maar na Dumbledore s’n, en nog ’n paar sekondes voor hy besef dat aangesien sy die Onderhoof was ... sy seker nou die Skoolhoof is ... so die vertrek agter die drakekop is nou hare ...

In stilte bestyg hulle die bewegende spiraaltrap en gaan by die sirkelvormige kantoor in. Hy weet nie wat hy verwag het nie: Miskien dat die vertrek in swart gedrapeer sal wees, of selfs dat Dumbledore se liggaam daar sal lê. Maar alles lyk amper presies net soos toe hy en Dumbledore 'n paar uur gelede hier weg is: Die silwer instrumente gons en woer op hulle speekbeentafels, Gryffindor se swaard lê in sy glaskas en blink in die maanlig, die Sorteelhoed staan op die rak agter die lessenaar. Maar Fawkes se sitstok is leeg; hy stort nog steeds sy treurlied oor die skoolgrond uit. En 'n nuwe portret het by die geledere van Hogwarts se oorlede Skoolhoofde aangesluit ... Dumbledore sluimer in 'n goue raam bokant die lessenaar: Sy halfmaanbril is hoog teen sy krom neus opgedruk en hy lyk vreedsaam en ongestoord.

Professor McGonagall loer vinnig na hierdie portret, maak 'n vreemde beweging asof sy haarself staal, loop dan om die lessenaar en kyk na Harry, haar gesig strak en vol plooië.

"Harry," sê sy, "ek wil graag weet wat jy en professor Dumbledore vanaand gedoen het toe julle hier by die skool weg is."

"Ek kan nie vir professor sê nie," sê Harry. Hy was die vraag te wagte en het sy antwoord gereed gehad. Dit was hier in hierdie einste vertrek dat Dumbledore hom aangesê het om vir niemand behalwe Ron en Hermione te vertel waaroor hulle lesse gegaan het nie.

"Harry, dit mag dalk belangrik wees," sê professor McGonagall.

"Dit is," sê Harry, "baie, maar hy wou nie hê ek moet vir enigiemand vertel nie."

Professor McGonagall gluur hom aan.

"Potter," (Harry merk op dat sy hom nou weer op sy van noem) "in die lig van professor Dumbledore se dood moet jy verstaan dat die situasie ietwat verander het –"

"Ek dink nie so nie," sê Harry en haal sy skouers op. "Professor Dumbledore het nooit vir my gesê om sy bevele te ignoreer as hy doodgaan nie."

"Maar –"

"Maar daar is een ding wat u behoort te weet voor die Ministerie hier aankom. Madame Rosmerta is onder die Imperiusvloek: Sy het Malfoy en die Doodseters gehelp; dis hoe die halssnoer en die vergiftigde heuningbier –"

"Rosmerta?" sê professor McGonagall ongelowig, maar voor sy kan aangaan, is daar 'n klop aan die deur agter hulle en professors Sprout, Flitwick en Slughorn kom moeg en verwese by die vertrek ingestap, gevolg deur Hagrid, wat nog steeds só erg huil dat sy hele groot liggaam van smart bewe.

“Snake!” roep Slughorn, wat meer geskok, bleek en natgesweet as die ander lyk. “Snake! Hy was in my klas! Ek dog ek het hom geken!”

Maar voor enigeen van hulle hierop kan reageer, praat daar ’n skerp stem van hoog teen die muur af: ’n Bleekgesig towenaar met ’n kort swart kuif het so pas terug by sy leë skilderdoek ingestap.

“Minerva, die Minister sal binne sekondes hier wees; hy het nou net by die Ministerie geDisappareer.”

“Dankie, Everard,” sê professor McGonagall en sy draai vinnig om na haar onderwysers.

“Ek wil praat oor wat met Hogwarts gaan gebeur voor hy hier aankom,” sê sy haastig. “Persoonlik is ek nie oortuig dat die skool volgende jaar moet heropen nie. Die dood van die Skoolhoof deur die toedoen van een van ons kollegas is ’n verskriklike klad op Hogwarts se geskiedenis. Dit is afgryslik.”

“Ek is seker Dumbledore sou wou hê die skool moet oop bly,” sê professor Sprout. “Ek voel al wil daar net een enkele student kom, dan behoort die skool vir daardie student oop te bly.”

“Maar sal ons ná dese enige studente oorhê?” vra Slughorn terwyl hy die sweet op sy voorkop met ’n sysakdoek afvee. “Ouers sal hulle kinders by die huis wil hou en ek kan nie sê ek neem hulle kwalik nie. Wat my betref, verkeer ons hier in Hogwarts nie in meer gevaar as elders nie, maar mens kan nie verwag dat ma’s só moet dink nie. Hulle sal hulle gesinne bymekaar wil hou; dis net natuurlik.”

“Ek stem saam,” sê professor McGonagall. “En in elk geval, dit is nie waar om te sê dat Dumbledore nooit ’n situasie voorsien het waarin Hogwarts mag toemaak nie. Toe die Kamer van Geheime-nisse weer geopen is, het hy dit oorweeg om die skool te sluit – en ek moet sê, professor Dumbledore se dood is vir my baie meer ontstel-lend as die idee dat Slytherin se monster onontdek diep binne-in die kasteel lewe ...”

“Ons moet die beheerliggaam raadpleeg,” sê professor Flitwick in sy piepstemmetjie. Daar is ’n groot kneusplek op sy voorkop, maar andersins lyk hy ongedeerd ná wat in Snape se kantoor met hom gebeur het. “Ons moet die bestaande prosedures volg. Ons moenie oorhaastige besluite neem nie.”

“Hagrid, jy het nog niks gesê nie,” sê professor McGonagall. “Wat dink jy; behoort Hogwarts oop te bly?”

Hagrid, wat regdeur die gesprek stil in sy groot kolletjiesakdoek bly huil het, lig nou sy opgeswelde oë en sê skor: “Ek weet nie, professor ... Dis vir die Huishoofde en die Hoofonderwyseres om te besluit ...”

“Professor Dumbledore het altyd waarde aan jou mening geheg,” sê professor McGonagall vriendelik, “en ek ook.”

“Wel, ek bly hier,” sê Hagrid terwyl die vet trane nog by sy ooghoeke uitloop en in sy gekoekte baard afdrup. “Dis my huis dié; dis al van ek dertien is my huis. En as daar kinders is wat wil hê ek moet vir hulle skoolhou, dan sal ek. Maar ... ek weet nie ... Hogwarts sonder Dumbledore ...”

Hy sluk swaar en verdwyn weer agter sy sakdoek, en dan is daar stilte.

“Goed,” sê professor McGonagall en kyk by die venster oor die skoolgrond uit om te sien of die Minister al aankom, “dan moet ek met Filius saamstem; die regte ding om te doen, is om die beheerraad te raadpleeg en hulle die finale besluit te laat neem.”

“Nou, wat betref die studente se terugkeer huis toe ... daar is ’n argument om dit vroeër eerder as later te doen. Ons kan reël dat die Hogwarts Express môre reeds kom, indien nodig –”

“Wat van Dumbledore se begrafnis?” sê Harry uiteindelik iets.

“Wel ...” sê professor McGonagall en verloor effens stoom; haar stem bewoë: “ek – ek weet dit was Dumbledore se wens om hier ter ruste gelê te word, hier by Hogwarts –”

“Dan is dit wat sal gebeur, is dit nie?” sê Harry driftig.

“As die Ministerie dink dit is gepas,” sê professor McGonagall. “Geen ander Skoolhoof is nog ooit –”

“Geen ander Skoolhoof het nog ooit meer vir hierdie skool opgeoffer nie,” brom Hagrid.

“Hogwarts behoort Dumbledore se laaste rusplek te wees,” sê professor Flitwick.

“Absoluut,” sê professor Sprout.

“En in daardie geval,” sê Harry, “behoort u nie die studente huis toe te stuur voor die begrafnis verby is nie. Hulle sal hom wil –”

Die laaste woord steek in sy keel vas, maar professor Sprout voltooi die sin vir hom.

“Groet.”

“Goed gesê,” piep professor Flitwick. “Baie goed gesê! Ons studente behoort hulde aan hom te bring; dit is baie gepas. Ons kan reël dat hulle daarná huis toe geneem word.”

“Ek sekondeer,” blaf professor Sprout.

“Ek veronderstel ... ja ...” sê Slughorn in ’n taamlik onthutste stem terwyl hy oor die skoolgrond afkyk. “Die Minister ... en dit lyk of hy ’n afvaardiging saamgebring het ...”

“Kan ek maar gaan, professor?” vra Harry dadelik.

Hy het geen begeerte om Rufus Scrimgeour vanaand te sien of deur hom ondervra te word nie.

“Jy mag,” sê professor McGonagall, “en maak gou.”

Sy loop na die deur en hou dit vir hom oop. Hy hardloop met die spiraaltrap en die verlate gange langs af; hy het sy Onsigbaarheidsmantel bo op die Sterrekundetoring gelos, maar dit maak nie saak nie; daar is niemand in die gange wat hom sien nie, selfs nie Filch, mevrou Norris of Peeves nie. Hy kom niemand teë nie totdat hy indraai by die gang wat na Gryffindor se geselskamer lei.

“Is dit waar?” fluister die Vet Vrou toe hy haar nader. “Is dit regtig waar? Is Dumbledore – dood?”

“Ja,” sê Harry.

Sy begin weeklaag en sonder om vir die wagwoord te wag, swaai sy vorentoe om hom in te laat.

Soos wat Harry verwag het, is die geselskamer stampvol. Die vertrek word stil toe hy deur die portretopening klim. Hy sien Dean en Seamus in ’n groep daar naby sit: Dit beteken die slaapsaal moet leeg wees, of amper. Sonder om met enigiemand te praat of enigsins oogkontak te maak, loop Harry reguit deur die vertrek en in by die deur na die seuns se slaapsaal.

Nes hy gehoop het, wag Ron vir hom; hy sit op sy bed, nog steeds aangetrek. Harry kom sit op sy eie hemelbed en vir ’n oomblik staar hulle net na mekaar.

“Hulle praat daarvan om die skool toe te maak,” sê Harry.

“Lupin het gesê hulle sal,” sê Ron.

Daar is ’n pouse.

“So?” sê Ron in ’n baie lae stem, asof hy dink die meubels luister dalk af. “Het julle een gekry? Het julle dit gekry? ’n – ’n Horcrux?”

Harry skud sy kop. Alles wat by daardie swart meer gebeur het, voel nou soos ’n nagmerrie; het dit werklik gebeur, en net ure gelede?

“Julle het dit nie gekry nie?” vra Ron afgehaal. “Was dit nie daar nie?”

“Nee,” sê Harry. “Iemand het dit al klaar gevat en ’n vals een daar gelos.”

“Dit al klaar gevat –?”

Woordeloos haal Harry die hangertjie uit sy sak, maak dit oop en gee dit vir Ron. Die volle verhaal kan wag ... dit maak nie vanaand saak nie ... Niks maak saak nie, behalwe die einde, die einde van hulle nuttelose avontuur, die einde van Dumbledore se lewe ...

“R.A.B.,” fluister Ron. “Maar wie was dit?”

“Weetie,” sê Harry; hy val sommer met sy klere aan op sy bed neer en staar nikssiende op boontoe. Hy is glad nie nuuskierig oor

R.A.B. nie; hy twyfel of hy ooit weer nuuskierig sal wees. Terwyl hy daar lê, besef hy skielik dit is stil buite op die skoolgrond. Fawkes het opgehou sing.

En hy weet, sonder om te weet hy weet dit, die feniks is weg; hy het Hogwarts vir goed verlaat, net soos wat Dumbledore die skool verlaat het, die wêreld verlaat het ... vir Harry verlaat het.

CHAPTER THIRTY



THE WHITE TOMB

All lessons were suspended, all examinations postponed. Some students were hurried away from Hogwarts by their parents over the next couple of days — the Patil twins were gone before breakfast on the morning following Dumbledore's death, and Zacharias Smith was escorted from the castle by his haughty-looking father. Seamus Finnigan, on the other hand, refused point-blank to accompany his mother home; they had a shouting match in the entrance hall that was resolved when she agreed that he could remain behind for the funeral. She had difficulty in finding a bed in Hogsmeade, Seamus told Harry and Ron, for wizards and witches were pouring into the village, preparing to pay their last respects to Dumbledore.

Some excitement was caused among the younger students, who had never seen it before, when a powder-blue carriage the size of a

house, pulled by a dozen giant winged palominos, came soaring out of the sky in the late afternoon before the funeral and landed on the edge of the forest. Harry watched from a window as a gigantic and handsome olive-skinned, black-haired woman descended the carriage steps and threw herself into the waiting Hagrid's arms. Meanwhile a delegation of Ministry officials, including the Minister of Magic himself, was being accommodated within the castle. Harry was diligently avoiding contact with any of them; he was sure that, sooner or later, he would be asked again to account for Dumbledore's last excursion from Hogwarts.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were spending all of their time together. The beautiful weather seemed to mock them; Harry could imagine how it would have been if Dumbledore had not died, and they had had this time together at the very end of the year, Ginny's examinations finished, the pressure of homework lifted . . . and hour by hour, he put off saying the thing that he knew he must say, doing what he knew was right to do, because it was too hard to forgo his best source of comfort.

They visited the hospital wing twice a day: Neville had been discharged, but Bill remained under Madam Pomfrey's care. His scars were as bad as ever — in truth, he now bore a distinct resemblance to Mad-Eye Moody, though thankfully with both eyes and legs — but in personality he seemed just the same as ever. All that appeared to have changed was that he now had a great liking for very rare steaks.

“ . . . so eet ees lucky 'e is marrying me,” said Fleur happily, plumping up Bill's pillows, “because ze British overcook their meat,

I've always said this."

"I suppose I'm just going to have to accept that he really is going to marry her," sighed Ginny later that evening, as she, Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat beside the open window of the Gryffindor common room, looking out over the twilit grounds.

"She's not that bad," said Harry. "Ugly, though," he added hastily, as Ginny raised her eyebrows, and she let out a reluctant giggle.

"Well, I suppose if Mum can stand it, I can."

"Anyone else we know died?" Ron asked Hermione, who was perusing the *Evening Prophet*.

Hermione winced at the forced toughness in his voice. "No," she said reprovingly, folding up the newspaper. "They're still looking for Snape but no sign . . ."

"Of course there isn't," said Harry, who became angry every time this subject cropped up. "They won't find Snape till they find Voldemort, and seeing as they've never managed to do that in all this time . . ."

"I'm going to go to bed," yawned Ginny. "I haven't been sleeping that well since . . . well . . . I could do with some sleep."

She kissed Harry (Ron looked away pointedly), waved at the other two, and departed for the girls' dormitories. The moment the door had closed behind her, Hermione leaned forward toward Harry with a most Hermione-ish look on her face.

"Harry, I found something out this morning, in the library."

"R.A.B.?" said Harry, sitting up straight.

He did not feel the way he had so often felt before, excited, curious, burning to get to the bottom of a mystery; he simply knew

that the task of discovering the truth about the real Horcrux had to be completed before he could move a little farther along the dark and winding path stretching ahead of him, the path that he and Dumbledore had set out upon together, and which he now knew he would have to journey alone. There might still be as many as four Horcruxes out there somewhere, and each would need to be found and eliminated before there was even a possibility that Voldemort could be killed. He kept reciting their names to himself, as though by listing them he could bring them within reach: *the locket . . . the cup . . . the snake . . . something of Gryffindor's or Ravenclaw's . . . the locket . . . the cup . . . the snake . . . something of Gryffindor's or Ravenclaw's . . .*

This mantra seemed to pulse through Harry's mind as he fell asleep at night, and his dreams were thick with cups, lockets, and mysterious objects that he could not quite reach, though Dumbledore helpfully offered Harry a rope ladder that turned to snakes the moment he began to climb. . . .

He had shown Hermione the note inside the locket the morning after Dumbledore's death, and although she had not immediately recognized the initials as belonging to some obscure wizard about whom she had been reading, she had since been rushing off to the library a little more often than was strictly necessary for somebody who had no homework to do.

"No," she said sadly, "I've been trying, Harry, but I haven't found anything. . . . There are a couple of reasonably well-known wizards with those initials — Rosalind Antigone Bungs . . . Rupert 'Axebanger' Brookstanton . . . but they don't seem to fit at all.

Judging by that note, the person who stole the Horcrux knew Voldemort, and I can't find a shred of evidence that Bungs or Axebanger ever had anything to do with him. . . . No, actually, it's about . . . well, Snape."

She looked nervous even saying the name again.

"What about him?" asked Harry heavily, slumping back in his chair.

"Well, it's just that I was sort of right about the Half-Blood Prince business," she said tentatively.

"D'you have to rub it in, Hermione? How d'you think I feel about that now?"

"No — no — Harry, I didn't mean that!" she said hastily, looking around to check that they were not being overheard. "It's just that I was right about Eileen Prince once owning the book. You see . . . she was Snape's mother!"

"I thought she wasn't much of a looker," said Ron. Hermione ignored him.

"I was going through the rest of the old *Prophets* and there was a tiny announcement about Eileen Prince marrying a man called Tobias Snape, and then later an announcement saying that she'd given birth to a —"

"— murderer," spat Harry.

"Well . . . yes," said Hermione. "So . . . I was sort of right. Snape must have been proud of being 'half a Prince,' you see? Tobias Snape was a Muggle from what it said in the *Prophet*."

"Yeah, that fits," said Harry. "He'd play up the pure-blood side so he could get in with Lucius Malfoy and the rest of them. . . . He's just

like Voldemort. Pure-blood mother, Muggle father . . . ashamed of his parentage, trying to make himself feared using the Dark Arts, gave himself an impressive new name — *Lord* Voldemort — the Half-Blood *Prince* — how could Dumbledore have missed — ?”

He broke off, looking out the window. He could not stop himself dwelling upon Dumbledore’s inexcusable trust in Snape . . . but as Hermione had just inadvertently reminded him, he, Harry, had been taken in just the same. . . . In spite of the increasing nastiness of those scribbled spells, he had refused to believe ill of the boy who had been so clever, who had helped him so much. . . .

Helped him . . . it was an almost unendurable thought now.

“I still don’t get why he didn’t turn you in for using that book,” said Ron. “He must’ve known where you were getting it all from.”

“He knew,” said Harry bitterly. “He knew when I used Sectumsempra. He didn’t really need Legilimency. . . . He might even have known before then, with Slughorn talking about how brilliant I was at Potions. . . . Shouldn’t have left his old book in the bottom of that cupboard, should he?”

“But why didn’t he turn you in?”

“I don’t think he wanted to associate himself with that book,” said Hermione. “I don’t think Dumbledore would have liked it very much if he’d known. And even if Snape pretended it hadn’t been his, Slughorn would have recognized his writing at once. Anyway, the book was left in Snape’s old classroom, and I’ll bet Dumbledore knew his mother was called ‘Prince.’”

“I should’ve shown the book to Dumbledore,” said Harry. “All that time he was showing me how Voldemort was evil even when he

was at school, and I had proof Snape was too —”

“‘Evil’ is a strong word,” said Hermione quietly.

“You were the one who kept telling me the book was dangerous!”

“I’m trying to say, Harry, that you’re putting too much blame on yourself. I thought the Prince seemed to have a nasty sense of humor, but I would never have guessed he was a potential killer. . . .”

“None of us could’ve guessed Snape would . . . you know,” said Ron.

Silence fell between them, each of them lost in their own thoughts, but Harry was sure that they, like him, were thinking about the following morning, when Dumbledore’s body would be laid to rest. He had never attended a funeral before; there had been no body to bury when Sirius had died. He did not know what to expect and was a little worried about what he might see, about how he would feel. He wondered whether Dumbledore’s death would be more real to him once it was over. Though he had moments when the horrible fact of it threatened to overwhelm him, there were blank stretches of numbness where, despite the fact that nobody was talking about anything else in the whole castle, he still found it difficult to believe that Dumbledore had really gone. Admittedly he had not, as he had with Sirius, looked desperately for some kind of loophole, some way that Dumbledore would come back. . . . He felt in his pocket for the cold chain of the fake Horcrux, which he now carried with him everywhere, not as a talisman, but as a reminder of what it had cost and what remained still to do.

Harry rose early to pack the next day; the Hogwarts Express would be leaving an hour after the funeral. Downstairs, he found the mood

in the Great Hall subdued. Everybody was wearing their dress robes and no one seemed very hungry. Professor McGonagall had left the thronelike chair in the middle of the staff table empty. Hagrid's chair was deserted too; Harry thought that perhaps he had not been able to face breakfast, but Snape's place had been unceremoniously filled by Rufus Scrimgeour. Harry avoided his yellowish eyes as they scanned the Hall; Harry had the uncomfortable feeling that Scrimgeour was looking for him. Among Scrimgeour's entourage Harry spotted the red hair and horn-rimmed glasses of Percy Weasley. Ron gave no sign that he was aware of Percy, apart from stabbing pieces of kipper with unwonted venom.

Over at the Slytherin table Crabbe and Goyle were muttering together. Hulking boys though they were, they looked oddly lonely without the tall, pale figure of Malfoy between them, bossing them around. Harry had not spared Malfoy much thought. His animosity was all for Snape, but he had not forgotten the fear in Malfoy's voice on that tower top, nor the fact that he had lowered his wand before the other Death Eaters arrived. Harry did not believe that Malfoy would have killed Dumbledore. He despised Malfoy still for his infatuation with the Dark Arts, but now the tiniest drop of pity mingled with his dislike. Where, Harry wondered, was Malfoy now, and what was Voldemort making him do under threat of killing him and his parents?

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by a nudge in the ribs from Ginny. Professor McGonagall had risen to her feet, and the mournful hum in the Hall died away at once.

"It is nearly time," she said. "Please follow your Heads of Houses

out into the grounds. Gryffindors, after me.”

They filed out from behind their benches in near silence. Harry glimpsed Slughorn at the head of the Slytherin column, wearing magnificent, long, emerald green robes embroidered with silver. He had never seen Professor Sprout, Head of the Hufflepuffs, looking so clean; there was not a single patch on her hat, and when they reached the entrance hall, they found Madam Pince standing beside Filch, she in a thick black veil that fell to her knees, he in an ancient black suit and tie reeking of mothballs.

They were heading, as Harry saw when he stepped out onto the stone steps from the front doors, toward the lake. The warmth of the sun caressed his face as they followed Professor McGonagall in silence to the place where hundreds of chairs had been set out in rows. An aisle ran down the center of them: There was a marble table standing at the front, all chairs facing it. It was the most beautiful summer’s day.

An extraordinary assortment of people had already settled into half of the chairs; shabby and smart, old and young. Most Harry did not recognize, but a few he did, including members of the Order of the Phoenix: Kingsley Shacklebolt; Mad-Eye Moody; Tonks, her hair miraculously returned to vividest pink; Remus Lupin, with whom she seemed to be holding hands; Mr. and Mrs. Weasley; Bill supported by Fleur and followed by Fred and George, who were wearing jackets of black dragon skin. Then there was Madame Maxime, who took up two and a half chairs on her own; Tom, the landlord of the Leaky Cauldron in London; Arabella Figg, Harry’s Squib neighbor; the hairy bass player from the Wizarding group the Weird Sisters;

Ernie Prang, driver of the Knight Bus; Madam Malkin, of the robe shop in Diagon Alley; and some people whom Harry merely knew by sight, such as the barman of the Hog's Head and the witch who pushed the trolley on the Hogwarts Express. The castle ghosts were there too, barely visible in the bright sunlight, discernible only when they moved, shimmering insubstantially on the gleaming air.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny filed into seats at the end of a row beside the lake. People were whispering to each other; it sounded like a breeze in the grass, but the birdsong was louder by far. The crowd continued to swell; with a great rush of affection for both of them, Harry saw Neville being helped into a seat by Luna. Neville and Luna alone of the D.A. had responded to Hermione's summons the night that Dumbledore had died, and Harry knew why: They were the ones who had missed the D.A. most . . . probably the ones who had checked their coins regularly in the hope that there would be another meeting.

Cornelius Fudge walked past toward the front rows, his expression miserable, twirling his green bowler hat as usual; Harry next recognized Rita Skeeter, who, he was infuriated to see, had a notebook clutched in her red-taloned hand, and then, with a worse jolt of fury, Dolores Umbridge, an unconvincing expression of grief upon her toadlike face, a black velvet bow set atop her iron-colored curls. At the sight of the centaur Firenze, who was standing like a sentinel near the water's edge, she gave a start and scurried hastily into a seat a good distance away.

The staff was seated at last. Harry could see Scrimgeour looking grave and dignified in the front row with Professor McGonagall. He

wondered whether Scrimgeour or any of these important people were really sorry that Dumbledore was dead. But then he heard music, strange, otherworldly music, and he forgot his dislike of the Ministry in looking around for the source of it. He was not the only one: Many heads were turning, searching, a little alarmed.

“In there,” whispered Ginny in Harry’s ear.

And he saw them in the clear green sunlit water, inches below the surface, reminding him horribly of the Inferi: a chorus of merpeople singing in a strange language he did not understand, their pallid faces rippling, their purplish hair flowing all around them. The music made the hair on Harry’s neck stand up, and yet it was not unpleasant. It spoke very clearly of loss and of despair. As he looked down into the wild faces of the singers, he had the feeling that they, at least, were sorry for Dumbledore’s passing. Then Ginny nudged him again and he looked around.

Hagrid was walking slowly up the aisle between the chairs. He was crying quite silently, his face gleaming with tears, and in his arms, wrapped in purple velvet spangled with golden stars, was what Harry knew to be Dumbledore’s body. A sharp pain rose in Harry’s throat at this sight: For a moment, the strange music and the knowledge that Dumbledore’s body was so close seemed to take all warmth from the day. Ron looked white and shocked. Tears were falling thick and fast into both Ginny’s and Hermione’s laps.

They could not see clearly what was happening at the front. Hagrid seemed to have placed the body carefully upon the table. Now he retreated down the aisle, blowing his nose with loud trumpeting noises that drew scandalized looks from some, including, Harry saw,

Dolores Umbridge . . . but Harry knew that Dumbledore would not have cared. He tried to make a friendly gesture to Hagrid as he passed, but Hagrid's eyes were so swollen it was a wonder he could see where he was going. Harry glanced at the back row to which Hagrid was heading and realized what was guiding him, for there, dressed in a jacket and trousers each the size of a small marquee, was the giant Grawp, his great ugly boulderlike head bowed, docile, almost human. Hagrid sat down next to his half-brother, and Grawp patted Hagrid hard on the head, so that his chair legs sank into the ground. Harry had a wonderful momentary urge to laugh. But then the music stopped, and he turned to face the front again.

A little tufty-haired man in plain black robes had got to his feet and stood now in front of Dumbledore's body. Harry could not hear what he was saying. Odd words floated back to them over the hundreds of heads. "Nobility of spirit" . . . "intellectual contribution" . . . "greatness of heart" . . . It did not mean very much. It had little to do with Dumbledore as Harry had known him. He suddenly remembered Dumbledore's idea of a few words, "nitwit," "oddment," "blubber," and "tweak," and again had to suppress a grin. . . . What was the matter with him?

There was a soft splashing noise to his left and he saw that the merpeople had broken the surface to listen too. He remembered Dumbledore crouching at the water's edge two years ago, very close to where Harry now sat, and conversing in Mermish with the Merchieftainess. Harry wondered where Dumbledore had learned Mermish. There was so much he had never asked him, so much he should have said. . . .

And then, without warning, it swept over him, the dreadful truth, more completely and undeniably than it had until now. Dumbledore was dead, gone. . . . He clutched the cold locket in his hand so tightly that it hurt, but he could not prevent hot tears spilling from his eyes: He looked away from Ginny and the others and stared out over the lake, toward the forest, as the little man in black droned on. . . . There was movement among the trees. The centaurs had come to pay their respects too. They did not move into the open but Harry saw them standing quite still, half hidden in shadow, watching the wizards, their bows hanging at their sides. And Harry remembered his first nightmarish trip into the forest, the first time he had ever encountered the thing that was then Voldemort, and how he had faced him, and how he and Dumbledore had discussed fighting a losing battle not long thereafter. It was important, Dumbledore said, to fight, and fight again, and keep fighting, for only then could evil be kept at bay, though never quite eradicated. . . .

And Harry saw very clearly as he sat there under the hot sun how people who cared about him had stood in front of him one by one, his mother, his father, his godfather, and finally Dumbledore, all determined to protect him; but now that was over. He could not let anybody else stand between him and Voldemort; he must abandon forever the illusion he ought to have lost at the age of one, that the shelter of a parent's arms meant that nothing could hurt him. There was no waking from his nightmare, no comforting whisper in the dark that he was safe really, that it was all in his imagination; the last and greatest of his protectors had died, and he was more alone than he had ever been before.

The little man in black had stopped speaking at last and resumed his seat. Harry waited for somebody else to get to their feet; he expected speeches, probably from the Minister, but nobody moved.

Then several people screamed. Bright, white flames had erupted around Dumbledore's body and the table upon which it lay: Higher and higher they rose, obscuring the body. White smoke spiraled into the air and made strange shapes: Harry thought, for one heart-stopping moment, that he saw a phoenix fly joyfully into the blue, but next second the fire had vanished. In its place was a white marble tomb, encasing Dumbledore's body and the table on which he had rested.

There were a few more cries of shock as a shower of arrows soared through the air, but they fell far short of the crowd. It was, Harry knew, the centaurs' tribute: He saw them turn tail and disappear back into the cool trees. Likewise, the merpeople sank slowly back into the green water and were lost from view.

Harry looked at Ginny, Ron, and Hermione: Ron's face was screwed up as though the sunlight were blinding him. Hermione's face was glazed with tears, but Ginny was no longer crying. She met Harry's gaze with the same hard, blazing look that he had seen when she had hugged him after winning the Quidditch Cup in his absence, and he knew that at that moment they understood each other perfectly, and that when he told her what he was going to do now, she would not say, "Be careful," or "Don't do it," but accept his decision, because she would not have expected anything less of him. And so he steeled himself to say what he had known he must say ever since Dumbledore had died.

“Ginny, listen . . .” he said very quietly, as the buzz of conversation grew louder around them and people began to get to their feet, “I can’t be involved with you anymore. We’ve got to stop seeing each other. We can’t be together.”

She said, with an oddly twisted smile, “It’s for some stupid, noble reason, isn’t it?”

“It’s been like . . . like something out of someone else’s life, these last few weeks with you,” said Harry. “But I can’t . . . we can’t . . . I’ve got things to do alone now.”

She did not cry, she simply looked at him.

“Voldemort uses people his enemies are close to. He’s already used you as bait once, and that was just because you’re my best friend’s sister. Think how much danger you’ll be in if we keep this up. He’ll know, he’ll find out. He’ll try and get to me through you.”

“What if I don’t care?” said Ginny fiercely.

“I care,” said Harry. “How do you think I’d feel if this was your funeral . . . and it was my fault. . . .”

She looked away from him, over the lake.

“I never really gave up on you,” she said. “Not really. I always hoped. . . . Hermione told me to get on with life, maybe go out with some other people, relax a bit around you, because I never used to be able to talk if you were in the room, remember? And she thought you might take a bit more notice if I was a bit more — myself.”

“Smart girl, that Hermione,” said Harry, trying to smile. “I just wish I’d asked you sooner. We could’ve had ages . . . months . . . years maybe. . . .”

“But you’ve been too busy saving the Wizarding world,” said

Ginny, half laughing. “Well . . . I can’t say I’m surprised. I knew this would happen in the end. I knew you wouldn’t be happy unless you were hunting Voldemort. Maybe that’s why I like you so much.”

Harry could not bear to hear these things, nor did he think his resolution would hold if he remained sitting beside her. Ron, he saw, was now holding Hermione and stroking her hair while she sobbed into his shoulder, tears dripping from the end of his own long nose. With a miserable gesture, Harry got up, turned his back on Ginny and on Dumbledore’s tomb, and walked away around the lake. Moving felt much more bearable than sitting still, just as setting out as soon as possible to track down the Horcruxes and kill Voldemort would feel better than waiting to do it. . . .

“Harry!”

He turned. Rufus Scrimgeour was limping rapidly toward him around the bank, leaning on his walking stick.

“I’ve been hoping to have a word . . . do you mind if I walk a little way with you?”

“No,” said Harry indifferently, and set off again.

“Harry, this was a dreadful tragedy,” said Scrimgeour quietly. “I cannot tell you how appalled I was to hear of it. Dumbledore was a very great wizard. We had our disagreements, as you know, but no one knows better than I —”

“What do you want?” asked Harry flatly.

Scrimgeour looked annoyed, but as before, hastily modified his expression to one of sorrowful understanding.

“You are, of course, devastated,” he said. “I know that you were very close to Dumbledore. I think you may have been his favorite

pupil ever. The bond between the two of you —”

“What do you want?” Harry repeated, coming to a halt.

Scrimgeour stopped too, leaned on his stick, and stared at Harry, his expression shrewd now.

“The word is that you were with him when he left the school the night that he died.”

“Whose word?” said Harry.

“Somebody Stupefied a Death Eater on top of the tower after Dumbledore died. There were also two broomsticks up there. The Ministry can add two and two, Harry.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Harry. “Well, where I went with Dumbledore and what we did is my business. He didn’t want people to know.”

“Such loyalty is admirable, of course,” said Scrimgeour, who seemed to be restraining his irritation with difficulty, “but Dumbledore is gone, Harry. He’s gone.”

“He will only be gone from the school when none here are loyal to him,” said Harry, smiling in spite of himself.

“My dear boy . . . even Dumbledore cannot return from the —”

“I am not saying he can. You wouldn’t understand. But I’ve got nothing to tell you.”

Scrimgeour hesitated, then said, in what was evidently supposed to be a tone of delicacy, “The Ministry can offer you all sorts of protection, you know, Harry. I would be delighted to place a couple of my Aurors at your service —”

Harry laughed. “Voldemort wants to kill me himself, and Aurors won’t stop him. So thanks for the offer, but no thanks.”

“So,” said Scrimgeour, his voice cold now, “the request I made of you at Christmas —”

“What request? Oh yeah . . . the one where I tell the world what a great job you’re doing in exchange for —”

“— for raising everyone’s morale!” snapped Scrimgeour.

Harry considered him for a moment.

“Released Stan Shunpike yet?”

Scrimgeour turned a nasty purple color highly reminiscent of Uncle Vernon.

“I see you are —”

“Dumbledore’s man through and through,” said Harry. “That’s right.”

Scrimgeour glared at him for another moment, then turned and limped away without another word. Harry could see Percy and the rest of the Ministry delegation waiting for him, casting nervous glances at the sobbing Hagrid and Grawp, who were still in their seats. Ron and Hermione were hurrying toward Harry, passing Scrimgeour going in the opposite direction. Harry turned and walked slowly on, waiting for them to catch up, which they finally did in the shade of a beech tree under which they had sat in happier times.

“What did Scrimgeour want?” Hermione whispered.

“Same as he wanted at Christmas,” shrugged Harry. “Wanted me to give him inside information on Dumbledore and be the Ministry’s new poster boy.”

Ron seemed to struggle with himself for a moment, then he said loudly to Hermione, “Look, let me go back and hit Percy!”

“No,” she said firmly, grabbing his arm.

“It’ll make me feel better!”

Harry laughed. Even Hermione grinned a little, though her smile faded as she looked up at the castle.

“I can’t bear the idea that we might never come back,” she said softly. “How can Hogwarts close?”

“Maybe it won’t,” said Ron. “We’re not in any more danger here than we are at home, are we? Everywhere’s the same now. I’d even say Hogwarts is safer, there are more wizards inside to defend the place. What d’you reckon, Harry?”

“I’m not coming back even if it does reopen,” said Harry.

Ron gaped at him, but Hermione said sadly, “I knew you were going to say that. But then what will you do?”

“I’m going back to the Dursleys’ once more, because Dumbledore wanted me to,” said Harry. “But it’ll be a short visit, and then I’ll be gone for good.”

“But where will you go if you don’t come back to school?”

“I thought I might go back to Godric’s Hollow,” Harry muttered. He had had the idea in his head ever since the night of Dumbledore’s death. “For me, it started there, all of it. I’ve just got a feeling I need to go there. And I can visit my parents’ graves, I’d like that.”

“And then what?” said Ron.

“Then I’ve got to track down the rest of the Horcruxes, haven’t I?” said Harry, his eyes upon Dumbledore’s white tomb, reflected in the water on the other side of the lake. “That’s what he wanted me to do, that’s why he told me all about them. If Dumbledore was right — and I’m sure he was — there are still four of them out there. I’ve got to find them and destroy them, and then I’ve got to go after the seventh

bit of Voldemort's soul, the bit that's still in his body, and I'm the one who's going to kill him. And if I meet Severus Snape along the way," he added, "so much the better for me, so much the worse for him."

There was a long silence. The crowd had almost dispersed now, the stragglers giving the monumental figure of Grawp a wide berth as he cuddled Hagrid, whose howls of grief were still echoing across the water.

"We'll be there, Harry," said Ron.

"What?"

"At your aunt and uncle's house," said Ron. "And then we'll go with you wherever you're going."

"No —" said Harry quickly; he had not counted on this, he had meant them to understand that he was undertaking this most dangerous journey alone.

"You said to us once before," said Hermione quietly, "that there was time to turn back if we wanted to. We've had time, haven't we?"

"We're with you whatever happens," said Ron. "But mate, you're going to have to come round my mum and dad's house before we do anything else, even Godric's Hollow."

"Why?"

"Bill and Fleur's wedding, remember?"

Harry looked at him, startled; the idea that anything as normal as a wedding could still exist seemed incredible and yet wonderful.

"Yeah, we shouldn't miss that," he said finally.

His hand closed automatically around the fake Horcrux, but in spite of everything, in spite of the dark and twisting path he saw stretching ahead for himself, in spite of the final meeting with

Voldemort he knew must come, whether in a month, in a year, or in ten, he felt his heart lift at the thought that there was still one last golden day of peace left to enjoy with Ron and Hermione.

Die Wit Graf

Al die klasse is gekanselleer, al die eksamens uitgestel. Party studente se ouers kom hulle gedurende die volgende paar dae inderhaas by Hogwarts haal – die Patil-tweeling is die oggend ná Dumbledore se dood al voor ontbyt weg en Zacharias Smith se hooghartige pa kom hom persoonlik by die skool oplaai. Seamus Finnigan, aan die ander kant, weier botweg om saam met sy ma huis toe te gaan; hulle gil op mekaar in die Ingangsportaal en uiteindelik gee sy kop en sê hy mag vir die begrafnis bly. Volgens wat Seamus later vir Harry en Ron sê, het sy gesukkel om slaapplek in Hogsmeade te kry, want towenaars en hekse stroom van heinde en verre na die dorpie en maak gereed om hul laaste eer aan Dumbledore te betoon.

Groot opgewondenheid heers onder die jonger studente toe hulle laat die middag voor die begrafnis vir die eerste keer sien hoe 'n poeierblou koets so groot soos 'n huis en getrek deur 'n dosyn reuse geveleude Palomino's uit die lug neerdaal en aan die rand van die Woud kom land. Harry kyk deur 'n venster hoe 'n reusagtige, aantreklike vrou met 'n olyfkleurige vel en swart hare by die koets se trappies afklim en haarself in die wagtende Hagrid se arms werp. Intussen word 'n afvaardiging van Ministerie-amptenare, insluitende die Minister van Towerkuns self, in die kasteel gehuisves. Harry vermy kontak met enigeen van hulle; hy is seker hy gaan vroeër of later gevra word om rekenskap te gee van Dumbledore se laaste uitstappie uit Hogwarts.

Harry, Ron, Hermione en Ginny bring al hulle tyd saam deur. Dit is asof die pragtige weer hulle koggel; Harry kan hom net indink hoe dit sou gewees het as Dumbledore nie dood was nie en hulle soveel tyd saam kon deurbring reg aan die einde van die skooljaar, met Ginny se eksamen agter die rug en geen druk van huiswerk nie ... en uur ná uur stel hy dit uit om die een ding te sê wat hy weet hy moet sê, om te doen wat hy weet reg is om te doen, want dit is te moeilik om van sy grootste bron van vertroosting afstand te doen.

Hulle besoek die siekeboeg twee keer 'n dag: Neville is al ontslaan, maar Bill bly steeds onder Madame Pomfrey se sorg. Sy letsels is nog so erg soos altyd; om die waarheid te sê, lyk hy nou baie soos Maloog Moody, hoewel hy genadiglik twee oë en bene het, maar sy persoonlikheid is nog presies net soos altyd. Al wat skynbaar verander het, is dat hy nou 'n groot liefde vir halfrou biefstuk ontwikkel het.

“... so 'y kan bly wees 'y trou met my,” sê Fleur vrolik terwyl sy Bill se kussings oppof, “want ek het nog altyd gesê die Britte maak 'ulle vleis te gaar.”

“Ek sal seker maar moet aanvaar dat hy regtig met haar gaan trou,” sug Ginny later daardie aand terwyl sy, Harry, Ron en Hermione langs die oop venster in Gryffindor se geselskamer sit en oor die skemer skoolgrond uitkyk.

“Sy's nie so erg nie,” sê Harry. “Maar lelik,” voeg hy haastig by toe Ginny haar wenkbroue lig, en sy giggel teësinning.

“Wel, as my ma dit kan vat, kan ek seker ook.”

“Enigiemand anders wat ons ken dood?” vra Ron vir Hermione wat deur die *Aandprofeet* blaai.

Hermione ril vir die gedwonge ongeërgdheid in sy stem

“Nee,” sê sy berispelend en vou die koerant toe. “Hulle soek nog na Snape, maar daar's geen teken ...”

“Natuurlik nie,” onderbreek Harry, wat hom vervies elke keer dat hierdie onderwerp aangeroei word. “Hulle sal Snape nie kry voor hulle nie vir Voldemort kry nie, en aangesien hulle dit ná só lank nog steeds nie reggekry het nie ...”

“Ek gaan bed toe,” sê Ginny en gaap. “Ek sukkel om te slaap vandat ... wel ... ek kan doen met 'n bietjie slaap.”

Sy soen Harry (Ron kyk vies weg), waai vir die ander twee en kry koers na die meisies se slaapsaal toe. Die oomblik dat die deur agter haar toegaan, leun Hermione vorentoe na Harry met 'n tipiese Hermione-agtige uitdrukking op haar gesig.

“Harry, ek het vanmôre iets uitgevind, in die biblioteek ...”

“R.A.B.?” vra Harry en sit regop.

Hy voel nie soos so baie kere vantevore opgewonde, nuuskierig en brandend van begeerte om 'n geheim op te los nie. Hy weet net die taak om die waarheid oor die werklike Horcrux uit te vind, moet afgehandel word voor hy 'n entjie verder kan aanbeweeg op die donker slingerpad wat voor hom uitstrek, die pad wat hy en Dumbledore saam aangedurf het en waarop hy nou alleen verder sal moet reis. Daar is miskien nog tot vier Horcruxe daar buite iewers en hy sal elkeen moet opspoor en vernietig voor daar selfs 'n vae

moontlikheid sal wees dat Voldemort doodgemaak kan word. Hy sê hulle name oor en oor vir homself op, asof die feit dat hy die lys aanhoudend hoor hulle binne sy bereik sal bring: “Die hangertjie ... die beker ... die slang ... iets van Gryffindor of Raweklou ... die hangertjie ... die beker ... die slang ... iets van Gryffindor of Raweklou ...”

Dit is asof hierdie mantra deur Harry se brein maal wanneer hy saans aan die slaap raak, en sy drome wemel van bekere, hangertjies en geheimsinnige voorwerpe waarby hy nie heeltemal kan uitkom nie, al probeer Dumbledore help en bied hy vir Harry ’n touleer aan wat in slange verander die oomblik dat hy daarteen begin opklim ...

Hy het die oggend ná Dumbledore se dood vir Hermione die nota in die hangertjie gewys en hoewel sy die voorletters nie dadelik herken het as dié van een of ander wildvreemde towenaar van wie sy al gelees het nie, is sy sedertdien meer gereeld biblioteek toe as wat streng genome nodig is vir iemand wat nie meer huiswerk het om te doen nie.

“Nee,” sê sy treurig, “ek het probeer, Harry, maar ek het niks gekry nie ... Daar is twee redelik bekende towenaars met daardie voorletters – Rosalind Antigone Bungs ... Rupert ‘Axebanger’-Brookstanton ... maar nie een van hulle maak enige sin nie. Te oordeel na daardie nota het die persoon wat die Horcrux gesteel het Voldemort geken, en ek kan nie ’n greintjie van ’n bewys kry dat Bungs of Axebanger ooit enigiets met hom te doen gehad het nie ... Nee, eintlik gaan dit oor ... wel, Snape.”

Net om die naam weer te sê, maak haar senuagtig.

“Wat van hom?” vra Harry bedruk en val terug in sy stoel.

“Wel, dis net, ek was soort van reg oor die Halfbloed Prinsbesigheid,” sê sy versigtig.

“Probeer jy dit invryf, Hermione? Hoe dink jy voel ek nou daaroor?”

“Nee – nee – Harry, dis nie wat ek bedoel het nie!” sê sy haastig en kyk om om seker te maak niemand kan hulle hoor nie. “Dis net dat ek reg was oor die feit dat die boek eens op ’n tyd aan Eileen Prince behoort het. Jy sien ... sy was Snape se ma!”

“Ek dog sy was nie veel vir die oog nie,” sê Ron. Hermione ignoreer hom.

“Ek het deur die res van die ou *Profete* geblaai, en daar was ’n klein aankondiging dat Eileen Prince met ’n man genaamd Tobias Snape gaan trou en later ’n aankondiging wat sê sy’t geboorte geskenk aan ’n –”

“– moordenaar,” spoeg Harry dit uit.

“Wel ... ja,” sê Hermione. “So ... ek was soort van reg. Snape moet baie trots gewees het op die feit dat hy ’n halwe ‘Prince’ was, verstaan jy? Volgens wat in die *Profeet* staan, was Tobias Snape ’n Moggel.”

“Ja, dit maak sin,” sê Harry. “Hy’t natuurlik die suiwerbloed-deel opgehemel sodat hy by Lucius Malfoy en die res van hulle kon inkom ... hy’s nes Voldemort: Suiwerbloed ma, Moggelpa ... skaam vir sy afkoms, probeer vrees vir hom inboesem deur die Donker Kunste te gebruik, gee vir homself ’n indrukwekkende nuwe naam – die *Heer Voldemort* – die *Halfbloed Prins* – hoe kon Dumbledore dit mis gekyk het –?”

Hy hou op praat en kyk by die venster uit. Hy verwyt Dumbledore nou al so lank vir sy onvergeeflike vertroue in Snape ... maar soos wat Hermione hom nou net onbedoeld herinner het, het hy wat Harry is hom op dieselfde manier laat bedrieg ... al het daardie gekrabbelde towerspreuke al hoe venyniger geword, het hy geweier om sleg te dink van die seun wat so slim was en hom so baie gehelp het ...

Hom gehelp het ... Dit is nou amper ’n ondraaglike gedagte ...

“Ek verstaan nog steeds nie hoekom hy jou nie gerapporteer het oor jy daai boek gebruik het nie,” sê Ron. “Hy moet geweet het waar jy dit alles vandaan kry.”

“Hy hét geweet,” sê Harry bitter. “Hy het geweet toe ek die *Sectumsempra* gebruik het. Hy’t nie regtig Legilimensie nodig gehad nie ... Hy’t dalk selfs al voorheen geweet toe Slughorn so gepraat het van hoe briljant ek in Towerdrankies is ... Hy moes nie sy ou boek onderin daai kas gelos het nie.”

“Nou hoekom het hy jou dan nie gerapporteer nie?”

“Ek dink nie hy wou homself met die boek assosieer nie,” sê Hermione. “Ek dink nie Dumbledore sou baie daarvan gehou het as hy dit moes weet nie. En selfs al hét Snape voorgegee dis nie syne nie, sou Slughorn sy handskrif dadelik herken het. In elk geval, die boek het in Snape se ou klaskamer agtergebly en ek wed julle Dumbledore het geweet sy ma se van was eers ‘Prince’.”

“Ek moes die boek vir Dumbledore gewys het,” sê Harry. “Hy het heeltyd vir my gewys hoe boos Voldemort was, selfs toe hy op skool was, en ek kon bewys het Snape was ook –”

“Boos’ is ’n sterk woord,” sê Hermione sag.

“Jy’s die een wat aanhoudend vir my gesê het die boek is gevaarlik!”

“Harry, ek probeer net sê jy blameer jouself te veel. Ek het gedink die Prins het ’n geniepsige humorsin, maar ek sou nooit kon raai hy’s ’n potensiële moordenaar nie ...”

“Nie een van ons sou kon raai Snape sou ... jy weet,” sê Ron.

Daar daal stilte tussen hulle neer; Ron en Hermione is besig met hul eie gedagtes, maar Harry is seker hulle dink aan die volgende oggend toe Dumbledore se liggaam ter ruste gelê gaan word. Harry was nog nooit voorheen by 'n begrafnis nie; daar was nie 'n liggaam om te begrawe toe Sirius dood is nie. Hy weet nie wat om te verwag nie en is effens bekommerd oor wat hy dalk sal sien, oor hoe hy gaan voel. Hy wonder of Dumbledore se dood vir hom meer werklik sal voel wanneer die begrafnis eers verby is. Daar was al oomblikke dat die afgryslieke realiteit daarvan hom wou oorweldig, maar daar was ook lang tye dat hy amper niks gevoel het nie, en ten spyte van die feit dat niemand in die kasteel oor enigiets anders gepraat het nie, was dit dan vir hom moeilik om te glo Dumbledore is werklik weg. Toegegee, hy soek nie soos met Sirius se dood desperaat na een of ander skuiwergat, een of ander manier waarop Dumbledore kan terugkom nie ... Hy voel in sy sak vir die koue kettinkie van die vals Horcrux wat hy nou oral met hom saamdra; nie soos 'n gelukbringer nie, maar om hom te herinner aan wat dit gekos het en wat nog gedoen moet word.

Harry staan die volgende oggend vroeg op om in te pak; die Hogwarts Express gaan 'n uur ná die begrafnis vertrek. Onder in die Groot Saal is die atmosfeer gedemp. Almal dra hul beste klere en niemand lyk juis honger nie. Professor McGonagall het die troonagtige stoel in die middel van die personeel se tafel oop gelos. Hagrid se stoel is ook leeg: Harry dink hy sien waarskynlik nie kans vir ontbyt nie; maar Rufus Scrimgeour het nie geskroom om Snape se plek in te neem nie. Harry vermy sy gelerige oë toe hulle die Saal fynkam; Harry kry die ongemaklike gevoel dat Scrimgeour na hom soek. Tussen Scrimgeour se gevolg merk Harry Percy Weasley se rooi hare en horingraambрил op. Ron toon geen teken dat hy van Percy bewus is nie, behalwe dat hy stukkies gerookte haring met buitengewone venyn met sy vurk bykom.

Oorkant aan die Slytherintafel sit en mompel Crabbe en Goyle onder mekaar. Al is hulle so groot en lomp, lyk hulle op 'n vreemde manier eensaam sonder die lang, bleek, baasspelerige Malfoy tussen hulle. Harry het nog nie veel aan Malfoy gedink nie. Sy haat is net op Snape gerig, maar hy onthou nog die vrees in Malfoy se stem daar bo-op die Toring, en die feit dat hy sy towerstaf laat sak het voor die ander Doodseters daar aangekom het. Harry weet Malfoy sou Dumbledore nie doodgemaak het nie. Hy verafsku Malfoy nog steeds omdat hy so behep is met die Donker Kunste, maar saam met sy weersin voel Harry nou ook 'n bietjie jammer vir hom. Harry

wonder waar Malfoy nou is en wat Voldemort hom alles dwing om te doen deur die dreigement om hom en sy ouers dood te maak.

Harry se gedagtes word onderbreek deur Ginny wat hom in die ribbes pomp. Professor McGonagall het opgestaan en die hartseer gedruis in die Saal hou onmiddellik op.

“Dit is amper tyd,” sê sy. “Volg asseblief julle Huishoofde buitentoe. Gryffindors, agter my aan.”

Hulle beweeg agter mekaar by hulle banke uit, in amper volslae stilte. Harry sien Slughorn stap vooraan die Slytherinry en dra 'n manjifieke, lang smaraggroen kleed met silwer borduursel op. Hy het professor Sprout, Hoesenproes se Hoof, nog nooit so skoon gesien nie en daar is nie 'n enkele laslappie op haar hoed nie. In die Ingangsportaal sien hulle Madame Pince langs Filch staan: sy dra 'n dik swart sluier wat tot op haar knieë afhang; hy dra 'n stokou swart pak en das wat na motballetjies ruik.

Toe hulle by die kliptrap buite die voordeure kom, sien Harry hulle beweeg in die rigting van die meer. Die son se warmte streel sy gesig terwyl hulle professor McGonagall in stilte volg na die plek waar honderde stoele in rye neergesit is. 'n Paadjie loop in die middel af: Daar staan 'n marmertafel heel voor en al die stoele is soontoe gedraai. Dit is die pragtigste somerdag.

'n Buitengewone versameling mense beset reeds die helfte van die stoele: verslons en deftig, oud en jonk. Harry ken die meeste van hulle nie, maar daar is 'n paar wat hy herken, insluitende lede van die Orde van die Feniks: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Maloog Moody, Tonks wie se hare wonder bo wonder weer helderpienk is, Remus Lupin met wie sy skynbaar sit en hande vashou, meneer en mevrou Weasley, Bill wat deur Fleur ondersteun word, en Fred en George wat swart draakvelbaadjies dra. Dan is daar Madame Maxime wat twee-en-'n-halwe stoele in beslag neem; Tom, die Stomende Pot se herbergier; Arabella Figg, Harry se Sisser-buurvrou, die towenaars-orkes Die Skikgodinne se harige baskitaarspeler; Ernie Prang, die Nagtelike Ridderbus se bestuurder; Madame Malkin van die mantelwinkel in Diagonaalstraat, en ander mense wat Harry net van sien ken, soos Die Swynenes se kroegman en die heks wat die kostrollie op die Hogwarts Express stoot. Die kasteel se spoke is ook daar, slegs sigbaar in die glinsterende sonlig wanneer hulle beweeg en vir 'n oomblik vervlietend in die helder lug skitter.

Harry, Ron, Hermione en Ginny kry sitplek aan die punt van 'n ry stoele langs die meer. Mense fluister oor en weer vir mekaar; dit klink soos 'n bries in die gras, maar die voëlgesang is baie harder. Die skare word al hoe groter; Harry sien hoe Luna Neville na 'n stoel

toe help en hy voel 'n groot teerheid vir hulle albei in hom opwel. Hulle is die enigste lede van die DS wat die nag van Dumbledore se dood op Hermione se oproep gereageer het en Harry weet hoekom: Hulle is die twee wat die DS die meeste gemis het ... moontlik die twee wat gereeld op hul muntstukke kyk in die hoop dat daar weer 'n vergadering sal wees ...

Cornelius Fudge loop verby hulle na die voorste rye toe; daar is 'n treurige uitdrukking op sy gesig en hy draai sy groen bolhoedjie soos gewoonlik om en om in sy hande. Harry herken vir Rita Skeeter, wat tot sy ontsteltenis 'n notaboek in haar hand soos 'n klou met rooi naels vashou; en dan sien hy met 'n baie erger skok van woede vir Dolores Umbridge met 'n onoortuigende uitdrukking van hartseer op haar padda-agtige gesig en 'n swart fluweelstrik bo-op haar ysterkleurige krulle. Toe sy die sentour Firenze soos 'n wag naby die rand van die water sien staan, skrik sy en gaan sit haastig op 'n veilige afstand van hom af.

Die personeel kom heel laaste sit. Harry sien Scrimgeour wat ernstig en waardig lyk in die voorste ry langs professor McGonagall. Hy wonder of Scrimgeour of enige van hierdie belangrike mense regtig jammer is oor Dumbledore se dood. Maar dan hoor hy musiek, vreemde, bonatuurlike musiek, en hy vergeet hoe hy die Ministerie verpes toe hy omkyk en probeer sien waar die musiek vandaan kom. Hy is nie die enigste een nie: Baie koppe draai om en soek, ietwat skrikkerig.

“Daar binne,” fluister Ginny is Harry se oor.

En dan sien hy hulle in die heldergroen, sonverligte water, 'n paar duim onder die oppervlak, net soos die skrikwekkende Inferi: 'n Koor meermense wat sing in 'n taal wat hy nie ken nie terwyl hul bleek gesigte rimpel en hul perserige hare oral om hulle dryf. Die musiek laat die hare op Harry se nek regop staan en nogtans is dit nie onaangenaam nie. Dit gaan baie duidelik oor verlies en wanhoop. Terwyl hy afkyk na die singers se wilde gesigte kry hy die gevoel dat hulle ten minste jammer is Dumbledore is weg. Dan stamp Ginny weer aan hom en hy kyk om.

Hagrid stap stadig met die paadjie tussen die stoele deur. Hy huil geluidloos, sy gesig blink van die trane en in sy arms, toegedraai in purper fluweel versier met goue sterre, dra hy wat Harry weet Dumbledore se liggaam is. Toe hy dit sien, skiet daar 'n skerp steekpyn in Harry se keel op: Vir 'n oomblik ontnem die vreemde musiek en die wete dat Dumbledore se liggaam so naby is die dag van al sy warmte. Ron lyk spierwit en geskok. Ginny en Hermione se trane loop in strome tot in hul skote af.

Hulle kan nie duidelik sien wat voor gebeur nie. Dit lyk of Hagrid die liggaam versigtig op die tafel neergesit het. Nou retireer hy met die gangetjie langs en blaas sy neus met harde trompetgeluide wat verontwaardigde kyke ontlok van party mense, onder andere Dolores Umbridge ... maar Harry weet Dumbledore sou nie omgee het nie. Hy probeer om 'n vriendelike gebaar te maak toe Hagrid verby hulle beweeg, maar Hagrid se oë is so opgeswel dat dit 'n wonder is dat hy kan sien waar om te loop. Harry loer om na die agterste ry waarheen Hagrid mik en besef nou eers wat hom soon toe lei, want daar, geklee in 'n baadjie en broek wat elkeen so groot soos 'n klein markiestent is, sit die reus Ghrop met sy aaklige groot kop wat soos 'n rotsblok lyk, geboë en gedwee, amper soos 'n mens. Hagrid gaan sit langs sy halfbroer en Ghrop klop Hagrid hard op die kop sodat sy stoel se bene in die grond insink. Vir een wonderlike oomblik wil Harry hardop lag. Maar dan hou die musiek op en hy draai om en kyk weer vorentoe.

'n Klein klossieshaar mannetjie in 'n eenvoudige swart kleed het intussen op die been gekom en staan nou voor Dumbledore se liggaam. Harry kan nie hoor wat hy sê nie. Nou en dan sweef daar 'n woord oor die honderde koppe tot by hulle. "Edelmoedigheid" ... "intellektuele bydrae" ... "groothartigheid" ... dit beteken nie veel nie. Dit het weinig te doen met Dumbledore soos wat Harry hom geken het. Hy onthou skielik woorde wat Dumbledore dalk liever sou gebruik het: "domkop", "eienaardigheid", "tjankbalie" en "bemiddelaar", en weer moet hy keer of hy gaan begin lag ... wat is dit met hom?

Daar is 'n sagte plasgeluid aan sy linkerkant en hy sien die meermense het bo die oppervlak uitgekom om ook te luister. Hy onthou hoe Dumbledore twee jaar gelede langs die kant van die water gehurk het, baie ná aan waar Harry nou sit, en in Meermins met die Meerhoofvrou gepraat het. Harry wonder waar Dumbledore Meermins geleer het. Daar is soveel dinge wat hy hom nooit gevra het nie, soveel dinge wat hy vir hom moes gesê het ...

En toe, sonder waarskuwing, breek dit soos 'n golf oor hom: die afgryslieke waarheid, meer volledig en onmiskenbaar as nog ooit tot dusver. Dumbledore is dood, weg ... Hy hou die koue hangertjie in sy hand so styf vas dat dit hom seermaak, maar hy kan nie keer dat die warm trane by sy wange afrol nie. Hy kyk weg van Ginny en die ander en staar uit oor die meer na die Woud, terwyl die mannetjie in swart se stem voortdreun ... Daar is 'n beweging tussen die bome. Die sentours het ook gekom om hulde te betoon. Hulle tree nie te voorskyn nie, maar Harry sien hoe hulle stil en half weggesteek

in die skadu's staan met hul boë wat langs hul sye hang, en na die townenaars kyk. En Harry onthou sy eerste nagmerrie-ondervinding in die Woud, die eerste keer dat hy daardie ding wat toe Voldemort was, moes konfronteer en hoe hy en Dumbledore nie lank daarna nie gesels het oor hoe om te veg as jy voel jy het nie 'n kans om te wen nie. Dumbledore het gesê dit is belangrik om te veg, om aan te hou veg, want slegs dan kan die bose in bedwang gehou word, hoewel dit nooit heeltemal uitgeroei kan word nie ...

En terwyl Harry daar onder die warm son sit, sien hy baie duidelik hoe mense wat vir hom omgee het die een ná die ander voor hom gestaan het: sy ma, sy pa, sy peetpa en uiteindelik Dumbledore, almal vasberade om hom te beskerm; maar nou is dit verby. Hy kan nie dat enigiemand anders tussen hom en Voldemort staan nie; hy moet vir goed afsien van die illusie wat hy al op die ouderdom van een moes afgeskud het: dat die beskerming van 'n ouer se arms beteken niemand kan hom seermaak nie. Hy gaan nooit uit hierdie nagmerrie wakker word nie, niemand gaan hom in die donker kom troos en fluister dat hy eintlik veilig is, dat dit eintlik alles net sy verbeelding is nie; die laaste en grootste van sy beskermers is dood en hy is nou meer alleen as wat hy nog ooit vantevore was.

Die mannetjie in swart hou uiteindelik op met praat en gaan sit weer. Harry wag dat iemand anders moet opstaan; hy verwag toesprake, moontlik een van die Minister, maar niemand beweeg nie.

Dan gil 'n klomp mense. Helderwit vlamme skiet uit om Dumbledore se liggaam en die tafel waarop dit lê: Die vuurtonge brand hoër en hoër en verberg die liggaam. Wit rook kronkel in die lug op en neem vreemde vorms aan: Harry dink vir een hartverskeurende oomblik hy sien 'n feniks vrolik die blou lug in vlieg, maar die volgende sekonde verdwyn die vuur. 'n Wit marmiergraf omhul nou Dumbledore se liggaam en die tafel waarop dit gerus het.

Daar is nog uitroepe van skok toe 'n sarsie pyle deur die lug aangevlieg kom, maar hulle val duskant die begrafnissgangers. Harry weet dit is die sentours se huldeblyk: Hy sien hoe hulle omdraai en tussen die koel bome in verdwyn. Net so sink die meermense stadig terug in die groen water en verdwyn uit sig.

Harry kyk na Ginny, Ron en Hermione: Ron se gesig is 'n plooi getrek asof die sonlig hom verblind, Hermione se gesig blink van die trane, maar Ginny huil nie meer nie. Sy kyk in Harry se oë met dieselfde harde, vurige kyk wat hy gesien het toe sy hom omhels het nadat hulle die Kwiddiekbeker in sy afwesigheid gewen het en hy weet op daardie oomblik hulle verstaan mekaar perfek en dat wanneer hy vir haar sê wat hy nou gaan doen, sy nie sal sê: "Wees

versigtig” of: “Moenie dit doen nie”, maar dat sy sy besluit sal aanvaar, want sy verwag niks minder van hom nie. En daarom staal hy hom om te sê wat hy al van Dumbledore dood is, weet hy moet sê.

“Ginny, luister ...” sê hy baie sag terwyl die stemme om hulle al harder word en die mense begin opstaan. “Ek kan nie meer met jou uitgaan nie. Ons moet ophou om mekaar te sien. Ons kan nie bymekaar wees nie.”

Met ’n vreemde, skewe glimlag sê sy: “Dis om die een of ander simpel, edel rede, nè?”

“Dit was soos ... soos iets uit iemand anders se lewe, hierdie laaste paar weke saam met jou,” sê Harry. “Maar ek kan nie ... ons kan nie ... Daar is dinge wat ek nou alleen moet doen.”

Sy huil nie; sy kyk hom net aan.

“Voldemort gebruik mense wat ná aan sy vyande is. Hy het jou al klaar een keer as lokaas gebruik, en dit was maar net omdat jy my beste vriend se suster is. Dink hoe gevaarlik dit vir jou sal wees as ons hiermee aangaan. Hy sal weet; hy sal van ons uitvind. Hy sal my deur jou probeer bykom.”

“Wat as ek nie omgee nie?” vra Ginny onverskrokke.

“Ek gee om,” sê Harry. “Hoe dink jy sou ek gevoel het as dit jou begrafnis was ... en dit was my skuld ...”

Sy kyk weg van hom, oor die meer uit.

“Ek het nooit regtig moed opgegee met jou nie,” sê sy. “Nie regtig nie. Ek het altyd bly hoop ... Hermione het gesê ek moet aangaan met my lewe, miskien met ’n paar ander ouens uitgaan, meer ontspan as jy naby is, want ek kon nooit praat as jy in ’n vertrek was nie, onthou jy? En sy’t gedink jy sal my dalk makliker raak sien as ek ’n bietjie meer – myself is.”

“Hermione is baie slim,” sê Harry en probeer glimlag. “Ek wens net ek het jou al vroeër gevra. Ons kon ’n ewigheid saam gehad het ... maande ... dalk jare.”

“Maar jy was te besig om die towenaarswêreld te red,” sê Ginny half laggend. “Wel ... ek kan nie sê ek is verbaas nie. Ek het geweet dit sal op die ou end gebeur. Ek het geweet jy sal nie gelukkig wees as jy nie op Voldemort jag maak nie. Miskien is dit hoekom ek so baie van jou hou.”

Harry kan dit nie verdra om hierdie dinge te hoor nie en hy weet daar sal niks van sy voornemens kom as hy hier langs haar bly sit nie. Hy sien Ron hou Hermione vas en streel sy hare terwyl sy op sy skouer snik en die trane by die punt van haar lang neus afdrup. Met ’n mistroostige gebaar staan Harry op, draai sy rug op Ginny en op Dumbledore se graf en loop weg om die meer. Dit voel draagliker

om te beweeg as om so stil te sit: net soos wat dit baie beter sal voel om so gou moontlik die Horcruxe te begin opspoor en Voldemort dood te maak as om te wag om dit te doen ...

“Harry!”

Hy draai om. Rufus Scrimgeour kom vinnig met die oewer langs na hom toe aan gehinkepink met behulp van sy kiere.

“Ek het gehoop ek kan ’n woordjie met jou wissel ... Gee jy om as ek ’n entjie saam met jou stap?”

“Nee,” sê Harry ongeërg en loop weer verder.

“Harry, dis ’n verskriklike tragedie,” sê Scrimgeour sag. “Ek kan nie vir jou sê hoe ontsteld ek was toe ek daarvan hoor nie. Dumbledore was ’n baie groot towenaar. Ons het ons meningsverskille gehad, soos jy weet, maar niemand weet beter as ek —”

“Wat wil u hê?” vra Harry prontuit.

Scrimgeour vererg hom, maar nes voorheen verander hy sy gesigsuitdrukking haastig en is nou die ene deernisvolle begrip.

“Jy voel natuurlik verpletter,” sê hy. “Ek weet jy was baie na aan Dumbledore. Ek dink jy was moontlik sy grootste gunsteling ooit onder sy studente. Die band tussen julle twee —”

“Wat wil u hê?” herhaal Harry en gaan staan.

Scrimgeour kom ook tot stilstand, leun op sy kiere en staar met ’n sluwe uitdrukking na Harry.

“Daar word gesê jy was by hom toe hy die skool die aand van sy dood verlaat het.”

“Wie sê dit?” vra Harry.

“Iemand het ’n Doodseter ná Dumbledore se dood bo-op die Toring Bedwelms. Daar was ook twee besemstokke daar bo. Die Ministerie kan twee en twee bymekaar sit, Harry.”

“Bly om dit te hoor,” sê Harry. “Wel, waarheen ek saam met Dumbledore is en wat ons gedoen het, is my saak. Hy wou nie hê mense moet weet nie.”

“Sulke loyaliteit is natuurlik bewonderenswaardig,” sê Scrimgeour, wat lyk of hy sy irritasie met moeite in toom hou, “maar Dumbledore is weg, Harry. Hy’s weg.”

“Hy sal net by die skool weg wees as niemand hier meer lojaal aan hom is nie,” sê Harry en glimlag ten spyte van homself.

“My liewe seun ... selfs Dumbledore kan nie terugkeer uit die —”

“Ek probeer nie sê hy kan nie. U sal nie verstaan nie. Maar ek het niks om vir u te vertel nie.”

Scrimgeour huiwer en sê dan in wat duidelik veronderstel is om ’n simpatieke stemtoon te wees: “Die Ministerie kan vir jou allerhande

vorms van beskerming gee, weet jy, Harry. Ek sal met groot graagte 'n paar van my Aurors tot jou beskikking stel –”

Harry lag.

“Voldemort wil my self doodmaak en g’n Auror sal hom keer nie. So dankie vir die aanbod, maar nee dankie.”

“Ek sien,” sê Scrimgeour en sy stem is nou koud, “en wat betref die versoek wat ek Kersfees tot jou gerig het –”

“Watter versoek? O ja ... dat ek vir die wêreld moet vertel watter goeie werk julle doen in ruil vir –”

“– om mense weer hoop te gee!” sê Scrimgeour skril.

Harry kyk hom 'n oomblik lank aan.

“Is Stan Shunpike al vrygelaat?”

Scrimgeour word 'n lelike pers kleur wat Harry baie aan oom Vernon herinner.

“Ek sien jy is –”

“Deur en deur Dumbledore se man,” sê Harry. “Dis reg.”

Scrimgeour gluur hom nog 'n oomblik lank aan, draai dan om en hinkpink sonder 'n woord verder weg. Harry sien Percy en die res van die Ministerie se afvaardiging wag vir hom; hulle loer senuagtig na die snikkende Hagrid en Ghrop wat nog steeds in hulle stoele sit. Ron en Hermione kom vinnig na Harry toe en loop verby Scrimgeour wat in die teenoorgestelde rigting beweeg; Harry draai om en stap stadig verder sodat hulle hom kan inhaal en uiteindelik beland hulle saam in die skadu van 'n beukeboom waaronder hulle al in gelukkiger tye gesit het.

“Wat wou Scrimgeour hê?” fluister Hermione.

“Dieselfde as met Kersfees,” sê Harry en haal sy skouers op. “Wil hê ek moet vir hom vertroulike inligting oor Dumbledore gee en die Ministerie se nuwe advertensie wees.”

Dit lyk of Ron vir 'n oomblik met homself worstel en dan sê hy hard vir Hermione: “Luister, laat my teruggaan en Percy opfoeter!”

“Nee,” sê sy streng en hou hom aan die arm vas.

“Dit sal my beter laat voel!”

Harry lag. Selfs Hermione grinnik effens, al verdwyn haar glimlag toe sy na die kasteel opkyk.

“Ek kan dit nie verdra om te dink ons kom dalk nooit weer terug nie,” sê sy sag. “Hoe kan Hogwarts toemaak?”

“Miskien sal dit nie gebeur nie,” sê Ron. “Ons is nie hier in meer gevaar as by die huis nie, of hoe? Dis nou orals dieselfde. Ek dink Hogwarts is eintlik veiliger; daar is meer towenaars hier om die plek te verdedig. Wat dink jy, Harry?”

“Ek kom nie terug nie, selfs al maak die skool weer oop,” sê Harry.

Ron gaap hom aan, maar Hermione sê hartseer: “Ek het geweet jy gaan dit sê. Maar wat gaan jy dan doen?”

“Ek gaan nog een keer terug na die Dursleys toe, want Dumbledore wou hê ek moet,” sê Harry. “Maar dit gaan net ’n kort kuiertjie wees, en dan waai ek vir goed.”

“Maar waarheen gaan jy as jy nie terug skool toe kom nie?”

“Ek het gedink ek sal dalk terug na Godric’s Hollow toe gaan,” mompel Harry. Die idee is al in sy kop van die aand wat Dumbledore dood is. “Vir my het alles daar begin. Ek het net so ’n gevoel ek moet teruggaan soontoe. En dan kan ek my ouers se grafte besoek; ek sal graag wil.”

“En wat dan?” vra Ron.

“Dan sal ek die res van die Horcruxe moet opspoor,” sê Harry met sy oë op Dumbledore se wit graf wat in die water aan die ander kant van die meer weerkaats word. “Dis wat hy wou hê ek moet doen; dis hoekom hy vir my alles van hulle vertel het. As Dumbledore reg was – en ek is seker hy was – is daar nog vier van hulle daar buite iewers. Ek moet hulle kry en hulle vernietig en dan moet ek die sewende deel van Voldemort se siel gaan soek, die deel wat nog in sy lyf is. Ek gaan hom doodmaak, en as ek Severus Snape langs die pad teëkom,” voeg hy by, “soveel te beter vir my, en soveel erger vir hom.”

Daar is ’n lang stilte. Die mense is nou al amper almal weg; die laaste paar loop wye draaie om die enorme Ghrop wat Hagrid styf vashou terwyl sy bedroefde smartlike snikke nog steeds oor die water eggo.

“Ons sal daar wees, Harry,” sê Ron.

“Wat?”

“By jou tante en oom se huis,” sê Ron. “En dan sal ons saam met jou gaan, waarheen jy ook al gaan.”

“Nee –” sê Harry vinnig. Hy het nie hiermee rekening gehou nie; hy wou hê hulle moes verstaan dat hy hierdie uiters gevaarlike reis alleen gaan aanpak.

“Jy’t een keer vantevore vir ons gesê,” sê Hermione sag, “daar is tyd om om te draai as ons wil. Ons hét nou tyd gehad, nie waar nie?”

“Ons is met jou, al gebeur wat ook al,” sê Ron. “Maar pêl, jy sal eers saam na my ma en pa se huis toe moet kom voor ons na enige ander plek toe gaan, selfs Godric’s Hollow toe.”

“Hoekom?”

“Bill en Fleur se troue, onthou?”

Harry kyk hom verstom aan; die idee dat enigiets so normaal soos ’n troue nog kan bestaan, voel ongelooflik en nogtans wonderlik.

“Ja-nee, ons kan dit nie misloop nie,” sê hy uiteindelik.

Sy hand sluit outomaties om die vals Horcrux, maar ten spyte van alles, ten spyte van die donker slingerpad wat hy voor hom sien uitstrek, ten spyte van die finale kragmeting met Voldemort wat hy weet moet kom, al is dit oor 'n maand, oor 'n jaar of oor tien, voel hy hoe sy hart ligter word by die gedagte dat daar nog steeds een laaste goue dag van vrede oorbly wat hy saam met Ron en Hermione kan geniet.